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TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS · EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

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THREE EXCITING ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

The HAPPY VALLEY

by MAX BRAND

Sand

by WILL JAMES

THE Gold TRAIL

by WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

DEC. 1949

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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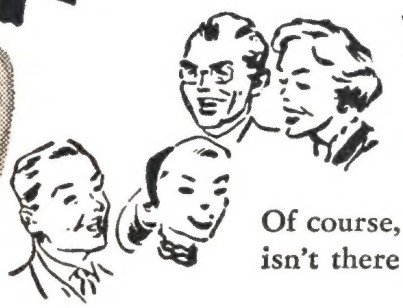

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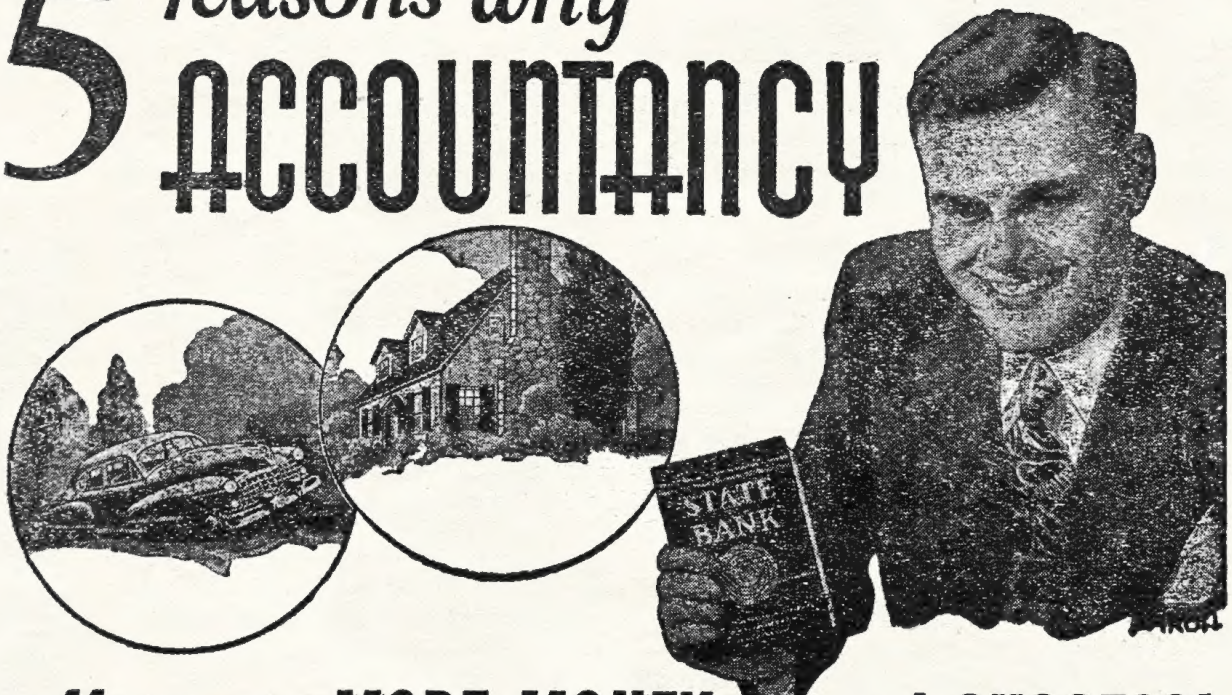

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Jim Fantom was only four days out of prison when a mysterious killer bullet put him on the dodge again—with a bounty on his head and every man's hand turned against him while he fought to stop a craftily-planned renegade coup!

MAX BRAND 11

SAND

Stranded in Montana at the mercy of the plains, young Tilden, spoiled son of a wealthy father, faces hardship as he takes on the double task of taming a wild black stallion—and battling his own way back to courage and manhood!

WILL JAMES 60

THE GOLD TRAIL

Nevada was wild, untamed country during the gold boom—and it took tough, straight-shooting hombres like the McClintocks to stem the roaring tide of lawlessness that threatened to change the mining towns to Satan's outposts!

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE 102

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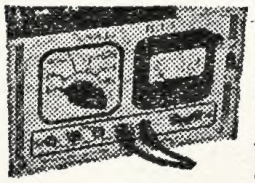

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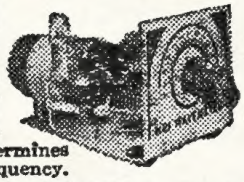

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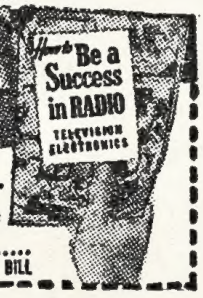

The Trail Boss

A FRIENDLY GET-TOGETHER FOR ALL HANDS!

"Once more the chores of day are done.
An evening's rest is earned and won.
So gather 'round, dismount your hoss;
And chat awhile with the old Trail Boss."

HOWDY, and welcome again, Trail Hands! We didn't mean to wax poetic on you. But there is something about the lilt of rhyming lines that has always struck a responsive chord in the heart of the colorful West. It goes clear back to the pioneer days, and the earliest cowboy ballads sung under silver stars to the plinking accompaniment of a twanging guitar.

Mighty pretty music too. One of these days we intend to explore the subject further. Right now there is something else on our mind.

A lot of stress has been put on the hardships the Western pioneers suffered and the dangers they constantly encountered. All of that is true. But to carve out of pure wilderness an empire as rich as the western half of our great country is today required more than just the ability to withstand physical hardship. It took brains on somebody's part. Real brains, and vision as well.

City and Country

There is an old wisecrack that goes something like this. The country boy and the city fellow are pretty much alike. They're just ignorant on different subjects. It used to be good for a laugh on any vaudeville circuit... if your years are such that you can remember vaudeville before the advent of radio and television.

It was a negative approach. And it always seemed to us that it would have been far closer to the truth to turn it around so that it went this way. The country boy and the city fellow are pretty much alike. They're just *smart* on different subjects.

Of course that old lanky-legged, owl-eyed Texas top riding-hand, Poker Face Partridge who always knew more about the West, and more characters in it than anybody I ever encountered, used to grin at the original version of that old joke. . . .

Sure enough, ain't it the truth, Poker Face would say. Ever meet a fellow by the name of Bill Bell. Bill was the ignorantest hombre about cow country I ever saw. That is, at the start, he was.

First time I met up with this fellow I was sitting on the porch of the Lomelia Hotel just letting the shade take over one board at a time and Bell comes piking up Main street in peg-top store pants and one of them hard-crown sailor brim straw hats. He's fresh off the morning train, and carrying a straw suitcase. Drummer I figure, or some other kind of city dude.

He sets the suitcase down and sits in the chair next to mine.

"Good morning, stranger," he says. "Do you know what time it is?"

I glance down the porch apiece. "About two planks shade to noontime," I tell him.

Cow Horns

That halts the palaver for a spell. Finally the dude, and he is the question-askin'-est character I ever seen looks down the street.

"Stranger," he says, "I hate to interrupt, "but could you tell me why the cow there hasn't any horns?"

He points down past the Longhorn Saloon towards Fowler's stock barn.

"The fact of the business is," I says just as polite, "there's a lot or reasons. Some cows are borned without horns. Others that ain't muleys is often dehorned a-purpose. And some just naturally gets them broke off in a tussle or one way and another. But the chief reason that there cow you're pointing at don't have no horns is because it's a horse."

"Hmm," says the dude, studying real

(Continued on page 8)

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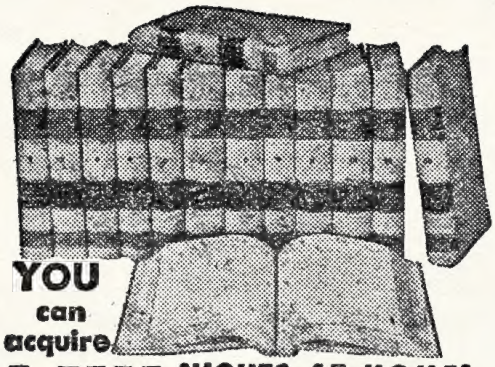

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THE TRAIL BOSS

(Continued from page 6)

hard. "No saddle. Guess that's why I didn't recognize it."

"Yessir," I says. "That's plumb possible. But saddles is throwed on a horse. Not growed on."

Next time I see Bell he is coming out of Judge Taylor's office and folding up a legal looking piece of paper which he stuffs into his inside coat pocket. The judge shakes hands with him at the door and then waits a second to catch me going by after Bell has gone.

"Poker Face," he says to me, "it looks as if the Bar T is going to have a new neighbor. Mr. William B. Bell, Bart., of Boston, Mass. has just bought himself the YW. Paid a fair price too, but not what I'd call over generous."

"That boy bought a ranch!" The news pure shocks me. "And him a Bart like you said, Judge. What in Tophet is a bartender doing owning a run down cattle spread?"

Judge Taylor smiles. "Partridge," he says right to my face, "sometimes the things you don't know are appalling. Bart is just an old contraction that stands for 'barrister.' It means lawyer. Bell is no boy either. He is smart in his own line. Some day he's going to be a credit to the cow country."

Well sir, Partridge would continue, my spirits drop like a chunk down a well thinking how misinformed a man like Judge Taylor can be.

The YW Picks Up

Next thing I know Bell has moved out to the YW spread. Durned if he don't take to coming over to the Bar T and palavering with old Mike McCabe, the owner. What's stranger than five aces in a deck, the tenderfoot and old Mike, who was borned with Texas cockleburrs in his hair, gets to be real friendly. It looks as if Bell is getting the best of the bargain. TheYW sure picks up.

Things rock along for a spell. Then one day I hear Bell talking to McCabe.

"Mike," he says, "these Longhorns are passé."

"Huh!" grunts the old man, not knowing any more than I did what the dude meant.

"They won't get the job done," Bell corrects himself talking language a man can

understand. "Good enough for Indian Reservation meat and Army beef. But for the Eastern markets, and exporting to Europe, chiefly England, the day is coming when we are going to have to raise better beef—tender, jucier steaks."

"You mean them dudes back East ain't got good teeth?"

Bell just smiles. "It's more than that, McCabe," he goes on. "Anyhow good beef doesn't eat any more grass than poor beef. And now that that new barb wire is coming out, if we imported some registered first class beef bulls, perhaps Herefords, or Shorthorns and crossed them with these native cows we'd get cows that gave more milk for their calves, and calves that would not fatten earlier for the market—and produce better beef in the bargain."

I expect old Mike who is notable for his hair trigger temper to bust loose like a jumping tarantula in the sand country at the way this ex-bannister from Boston—and I don't mean Boston, Texas—is telling him how to run his cow business. Instead durned if them two don't put their ignorances together.

Stringing Wire!

It's sickening. First thing I know we're building fences . . . just like a dad-blamed nester. Cowboys, mind you, stringing wire! Then we start building tanks to hold rain water, and drilling wells and setting up windmills.

Worse than that, McCabe and Bell who have thrown in together on the deal by this time begin planting hay for winter feed on some of the best pastures.

I can see it ain't going to be long before me and the rest of the boys working what is now the Three Bell brand cattle are going to be out of a job. When I mention this in a tender way to Mike, the salty old buzzard just grins and says, "Hang on, Poker Face. We're going places. And so's the rest of the whole big cattle empire of the West. Wait and see."

Well sir, Poker Face would conclude, I didn't wait. I quit because I could already see where Mike and Bell was headed was going to be plumb too hot for comfort. And sure enough I was wrong. Danged if the Three Bell ranch hadn't spread plumb into the next county.

Moreover a lot of their neighbors were

(Continued on page 153)

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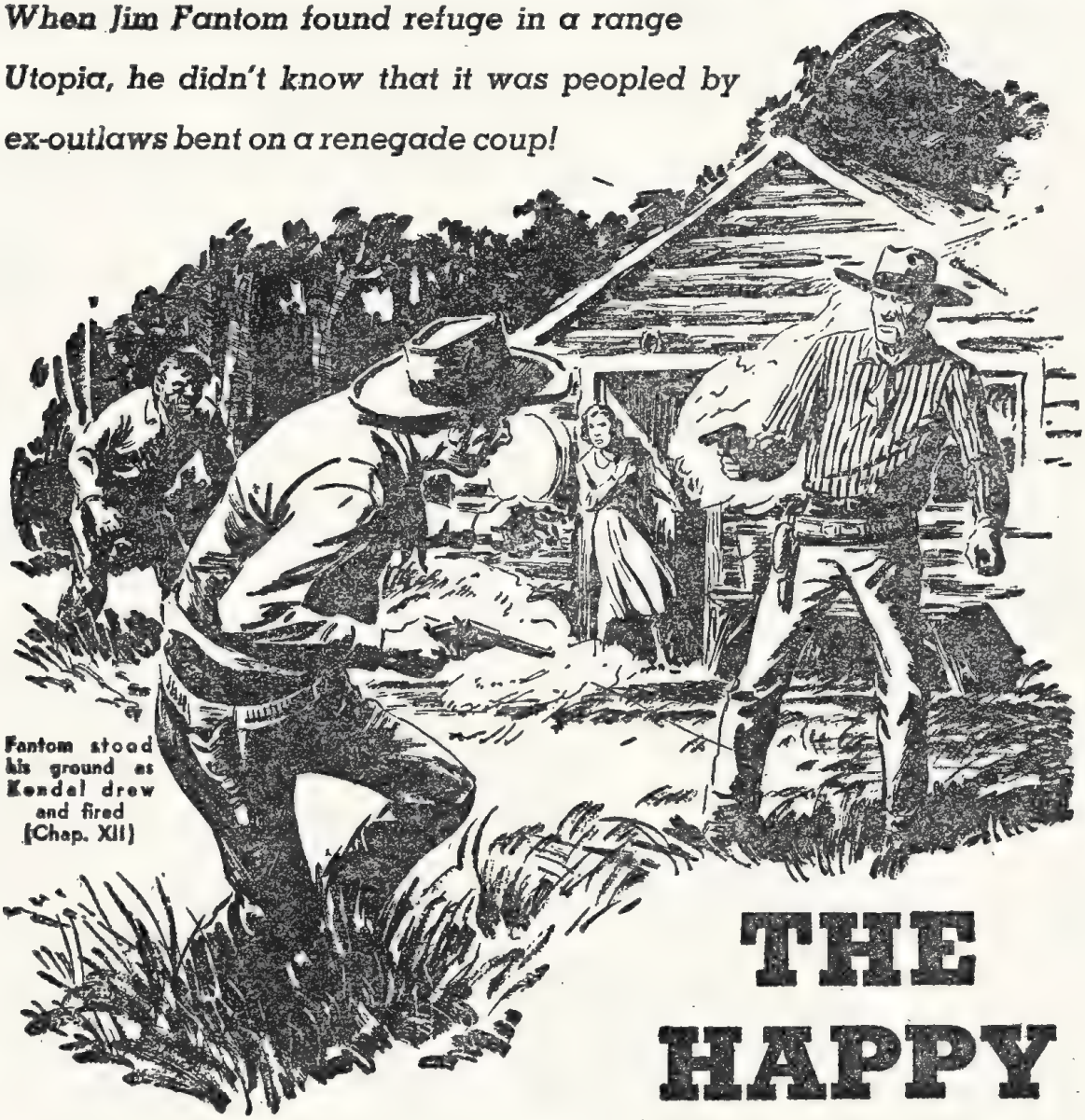

Fantom stood his ground as Kendal drew and fired (Chap. XII)

THE HAPPY VALLEY

I

LITTLE Danny Green brought the news into Burned Hill. Danny had been out looking for strays, and when he came plunging back he was riding his pinto to death. He made a little detour and paused at the house of the Dollars.

"Where's Tom?" he screeched.

"Back in the smokehouse cutting up a hog," said Lew Dollar.

"Then you go tell him the Phantom's back! I seen him with my own eyes. You tell Tom to clear out!"

Some of the Dollars put together a pack of food. Others rolled blankets

inside a slicker. Tom himself, hastily summoned from the smokehouse, rushed for the corral, and in another moment was off across country, flattening himself along the back of his gelding. He rode so hard that the next day, says legend, he pulled up in Stumpy Hollow, which is a hundred miles away.

But Danny Green had not waited to see all of these developments. He drove straight on into Burned Hill, and stormed up the main street.

"Hey, Sheriff!" he screamed. "The Phantom! I seen him comin' up Fuller's Draw—"

Sheriff "Bud" Cross was taking it easy in his front yard. He almost swallowed the large quid of tobacco which was stowed in one cheek, then he lunged into his office and reached for his guns.

Danny meanwhile had reached the Phelan home. Larry Phelan was digging potatoes.

"Larry, Larry!" shouted the boy. "The Phantom's comin'! I seen him in Fuller's Draw!"

The spade fell from the hands of Larry Phelan. Then he remembered that on the other side of the board fence at the side of the yard, pretty Josephine Dolan was standing on a box to watch him work and exchange the time of day. The thought of her stiffened the back of Larry Phelan.

"It's a lie!" he snarled. "He couldn't come back this soon!"

"Maybe he's busted loose from the penitentiary," said the boy. "Or maybe he's had his term shortened up for bein' good!"

Danny Green turned his horse around, disappointed at the effect of his news. "Well, I've told you," he said, and rode away.

"What phantom?" asked Josephine Dolan, when he had gone.

Young Larry Phelan gripped the handle of the spade. "Jimmy Fantom. You've heard about him, I guess."

"Never a word. We only been in town six months."

"Well—it's a funny thing that you ain't heard. Even if he's been five years away."

"Why should he have it in for you?" she asked.

"He's a devil! That's all!" Larry breathed. "When I was a kid, this here Jim Fantom got me and Tom Dollar to go out with him and hold up the Fullerton stage!"

"Larry!" cried the girl.

"They was *three* men guardin' that stage," he went on. "And they was all shot down. Well, it was Jim Fantom that dropped 'em all. He had an old-fashioned forty-four, and that was how everything was proved ag'in him!"

"Did he kill the three men?"

"Nope. Just wounded. He'd 'a' hung, wouldn't he, if he'd 'a' killed 'em?"

"Weren't any of you hurt?"

"Aw, nobody but Fantom. He got a slug in his left forearm, and one that drilled through the thigh of his right leg. But that didn't bother Jim none. Why, he rode ten mile with them wounds. He's kind of an Indian, for standing pain!"

"And then what happened?"

"Why—" said Larry Phelan, and paused. "They run down me and Dollar, and they found some of the stuff on us. Then they wanted to know which of us had done the shootin', and had the forty-four-caliber gun. They said all they wanted was the man that had done the shootin'. So—"

"So you turned state's evidence," said Jo Dolan. "But they couldn't get him, of course. He must of been cached away in the hills."

"Tom Dollar told where he was," muttered Phelan.

He heard a stifled gasp. "If he's coming back, I suppose that it means he'll try to get you. Ain't you terribly scared, Larry?

"Scared?" shouted Phelan with unnecessary force. "I'm gunna go down the street and meet him comin' in. . . ."

LARRY PHELAN, though he never had been so frightened in his life, was no coward. He was a fighting man, he knew guns, and the one blot on his fair name was the turning of state's evidence in that unlucky affair. So now, since battle there must be, he got ready for battle. But he did not select a rifle or a revolver. Instead, he took a sawed-off shotgun. He loaded that gun with care,

and, with it slung over the hollow of his left arm, walked slowly down the street.

Suddenly a mustang cantered out of a side street. It was the sheriff. He drew rein beside Phelan.

"Larry," he said, "you better go home, and stay home! I'm gunna go down to the end of the town and try to stop him on the way up."

"You don't need to do it for my sake," said Phelan. "I'll take care of myself—and him too, maybe!"

The sheriff turned his horse and rode off. Phelan was thrilled by a murmur of applause. Up to his side came little Sam

JIM FANTOM

Kruger. "That's the stuff, Larry," said he. "You wouldn't take water from nobody, not even the Phantom!"

Larry Phelan looked down at Kruger with mingled astonishment and disgust. He knew that Kruger had hated him passionately since a time when Phelan had referred to him as a "dancing rat" in front of pretty Jo Dolan. But here he was, muttering praises and encouragement.

"Thanks," grunted Phelan. "I'm gunna blow the skunk's liver right in two. You stick along, kid, and you'll see me do it!"

Phelan went on until he came to Bertram's saloon. He looked up and down the long line of idlers outside. "Come in and liquor, boys," said he, airily, and he waved toward the saloon entrance. He waited until they had crowded in before him, all except one man with a long, patriarchal gray beard.

"Ain't you gunna have a taste, oldtimer?" asked Larry Phelan.

"I've passed my drinking days," said the other.

Larry shrugged. He went on into the saloon and drew out his wallet. "Let's have a taste all around, Bertram," he called.

Bertram spun glasses and bottles into position.

"Here's to you, boys," said Phelan grandly.

"To the bravest man in Burned Hill!" croaked a shrill voice. It was little Kruger, standing at the farther end of the bar. "Another!" he squeaked. "Liquor up, boys, and give our friend good luck!"

Once more the glasses were filled. The second shot followed the first, and Phelan winked the tears out of his eyes. The sweet fire had burned his throat, but almost immediately he craved another. He treated again, and again. The whisky bottles were still rumbling up and down the bar, when he became aware of Sam Kruger again speaking.

"After all," the little man was saying, "what did the Phantom ever do? Them two that he killed in Tombstone, they was both greasers an' it was an Indian that he shot in Chihuahua!"

"Harry Lord was getting to be an old man when the kid blew the front of his face in."

"And Lynch wasn't lookin'. The Phantom didn't even give him time to fill his hand."

"Naw. That ain't right. I was there, buddies, an' he called out to Lynch to fill his hand, all right. Naw, give the devil his due!"

"Well," said Phelan, "I'll tell all of you what I'm gunno do to him. I'm gunna give him one barrel in the belly, an' then I'm going to step up and blow his face off with the second barrel."

"Good kid! You'll do it, too!"

The front door of the saloon was dashed open.

"Hey! Hey!" gasped little Danny Green. "He's double-crossed the sheriff and come in from the other end of

the town and—he—he's almost here now!"

When Larry Phelan heard this announcement, he felt a sudden desire to run; and he had to snatch up the shotgun and hold it at the ready before a little of his courage reasserted itself. And by then a brisk step was already coming.

"You've had a dusty trip, young man!" Phelan heard a clear voice hail.

A voice, deeper and calmer than he remembered the voice of Jim Fantom, replied. "Will you come in and have something, stranger? I hate to drink alone."

"Thanks," said the other. "I guess I'm past those days. But you'll sure find a crowd inside, though."

"Praying?" asked Jim Fantom, with a short laugh.

NOT a hand, not a foot was stirring in Bertram's saloon. The brisk step drew nearer, the door was flung open, and Jim Fantom stood before them. He had gone away a boy of eighteen, he came back a man, and more than a man, of twenty-three. Over each temple appeared a tuft of gray hair that gave him the look of thirty-five, at least. But two things remained to him that had been true of the boy who was taken away those years before—the lightly arched nose, thin and sensitive about the nostrils, and the unusually blue eyes.

Larry Phelan gripped the heavy shotgun until it trembled in his grasp. If there had been so much as a gesture toward him, he would have leveled the weapon and pulled both triggers. But James Fantom turned his back upon that crowd, upon that trembling shotgun. He stepped to the bar.

"Hello, Bertram," said he. "Give me a glass of beer, and have something yourself." He added with a gesture over his shoulder, as Bertram poured out the foaming beer, "I don't see any other men in here to drink with, Bertram!"

The whiplash of that insult had been drawn across every face alike, yet no one moved.

Jim Fantom finished drinking his beer. Then he rested his elbows on the upper edge of the varnished bar.

"I came back lookin' for two men," said he. "Tom Dollar wasn't at home. The other was Larry Phelan, and I've found him here." He smiled at Phelan. "Yes, Larry, you're the main cause of me takin' this ride, just as you're the main reason of my short hair!"

Phelan could not endure it any longer. If he were to strike at all, he must strike now.

"You—Fantom—if you got anything to do, you start it now, will you?" he roared. "Or else shut your face!"

But Fantom did not stir a hand toward his gun.

"I came back here to kill Larry Phelan, and kill him I will—but not by a damn sight when he's drunk."

"Now!" said Phelan to his heart.

But he could not stir, it seemed. The gloved hand of Fantom reached out and plucked the shotgun away from his nerveless grasp.

It was more horrible than a murder, this shaming of a grown man.

"Here—you!" said Fantom, and reaching out the butt of the gun, jabbed Phelan with it. "Take this home with you. You'll need it later on—for rabbits!"

Phelan took the gun and fled, while out of the saloon behind him came the remainder of those who had drunk with him. They wanted nothing except to escape from that scene.

After they had scattered, Jim Fantom went out onto the veranda, where the patriarchal stranger was sitting.

"Guess I don't know your name," Jim said.

"I know yours," said the gray-bearded man, "and mine is Jonathan Quay."

"Quay?" said Fantom. "Quay? Are you that fellow who takes crooks when they get out of prison and helps them to go straight?"

"I've done that."

"Well, I'm a case for you," said Fentom. "Straighten me out if you can."

"Do you need me?"

"Well, take a look! Three years in the reform school—and five years in prison. And I'm twenty-three."

"You deserved the reform school," said Quay, with perfect conviction. "You deserved it, because you called every day wasted that didn't see you in a fight. And it was good for you. For three years you had to submit to authority. In a way, you really liked it. Is that right?"

Fantom rubbed his chin. "You seem to know a bit about me," said he.

As Kendal's gun barked, the mare jumped over the fence (Chap. IX)

"After reform school," Quay went on, "you had only a few months. In those months you killed an Indian in Chihuahua, you killed Lynch, and you killed Harry Lord, both of them famous gunmen."

"They'd asked for trouble."

"Next you shot down three guards and robbed a stage."

"And got the only punishment! The other two sneaks, who'd persuaded me into the job, and then had got out—"

"Persuaded you into it?"

"Why, they dared me. I wouldn't let a dare go by—not in those days!"

"Then the law sent you to prison. Well, the other pair weren't worth bothering about, but the law started hammering you into good metal. And as soon as they thought you had straightened out, they cut down your sentence!"

"It was the warden," said the boy. "There was one man with a heart as big—" He broke off. "How do you know about these here things? You seem to know the whole book of me!"

"It made interesting reading," said Quay, "and as you know, my business is trying to help boys who have been turned out of prison gates."

Fantom frowned. "Kind of you to take an interest," he said. "But I guess I'll paddle my own canoe."

"You'll paddle it into a rapids, unless you get out of this town," answered Quay. "Dollar's cut and run for it, but if somebody kills your friend Phelan inside of the time you're in town, who'll be blamed for it?"

"You mean me?"

"If you were in the sheriff's place, who else would you suspect?"

The boy set his teeth. "Well—" he began.

"You'd better go," said Quay gently.

"I'm damned if I'll go," said the boy.

"Very well," said Quay. "I knew that you wouldn't."

"Why did you know that?"

"Because gray hairs don't make an old mind!" answered Quay. "God be with you!"

II

JONATHAN QUAY left the veranda of the saloon and started down the street, but Jim sat on the veranda until the sun hung low in the west. Then he sauntered away, still thoughtful.

He made the round of Burned Hill to the old swimming pool and circled back through the woods behind the Lander house, pausing in the open space where on a moonlight night he and "Chip" Lander had fought once a famous battle. He was thirteen and Chip fifteen. One dreadful hour they had battled here. Jim could remember still vividly the finishing punch, and afterwards wakening on the knees of Chip, who was saying fine things about him. "Next year, you'll be able to beat me to a pulp," Chip had said.

A fine fellow, Chip Lander. The heart of Fantom warmed as he thought of the boy, who had gone off onto the great range and was heard of no more in Burned Hill. He was very sad as he returned to town.

A youngster burst out of a garden gate before him and darted into the street.

"Billy Dolan," cried a girl's voice. "You come right back here. Dad'll spank you within an inch of your life!"

"I don't care!" cried Billy.

The girl suddenly emerged in pursuit. Fleet was the boy, and dodged like a rabbit, but the girl was arrowy swift. In a moment the boy was struggling furiously.

"Leave go! It ain't fair to grab me by the ear! I'll hit you, Jo!"

"If you hit me," said Jo Dolan, "I'll turn you over and spank you, right in front of that man."

"You can't! You dassen't!"

"Can't I, though!" she said.

In her round arm there was strength enough to rein a bucking mustang or to swing an ax. She stepped like a deer, lightly and proudly; there was both laughter and sternness in her eyes. She dragged the culprit to the front gate and thrust him in.

"You go upstairs and get ready for supper, and I won't tell on you. But if you don't, I'll catch you again and do what I promised!"

Billy Dolan sulked up the path, head down, hands in his pockets, dark schemes of revolt and vengeance in his mind.

"He's a handful!" panted the girl to Fantom. "Another year and he'll be too much for me."

"Not if you get a good ear-hold."

She laughed. "You're a stranger in town?"

"Yeah. I just came in. Looks like a good town to me."

"It's pretty dead, but I guess it's all right. We been stirred up today, though. The Phantom's come back!"

"Who's he?"

"Jim Fantom. He's been in the penitentiary for five years. But now he's come back to get even."

"For what?"

"He got a bad deal, in some ways, I guess. But he's a real mean one, now."

"I hope I don't meet him," said Jim.

"You better not. Still, if I was a man, I wouldn't let him bully me around the way that he does the others. I'd die, first!"

"I bet you would."

"Well, so long. I hope you like the town!"

"So long," said Jim. "What's your name, might I ask?"

"Me? I'm Josephine Dolan." She added: "Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Jim Fantom," said he.

HE TOOK off his hat and stepped a little closer, so that she could see his lean, hard face. She shrank away from him, but came bravely back.

"I guess I've said some pretty hard things to you, Jim Fantom."

"Sometimes a bad start makes a good finish," he smiled.

"I was a fool to talk so free about a man I'd never seen."

"You're going to see me again," said he. "That is, if you don't mind people talking about you."

"Jiminy!" said the girl. "I wouldn't mind." She laughed. "Drop around tomorrow," said she. "We're goin' up country next day."

"Maybe I'll be goin' up country, too," said Jim Fantom.

Her face grew suddenly cold; he realized as he turned down the street that he had gone much too fast. But it seemed to him that he never had seen another like her! What a woman to make a wife in this man's country! Those thoughts filled the mind of Jim Fantom, so that when he heard the half-stifled bark of a revolver, somewhere behind him, he hardly noticed it.

He went on slowly until he came to the hotel. It was supper time. A dozen men sat at the long table in the dining room, and he took the place at the foot, nearest the window. They were all afraid. Even the waiter was ill at ease. Fantom lost his patience.

"What's got into you, man?" said he, "I ain't goin' to eat you, am I?"

"I dunno!" stammered the waiter. "I sure hope not, sir. Can I fetch you something else?"

"No," said Fantom, and gave his attention to his cup of coffee. It was piping hot, and he had barely sipped of it when he was aware of a jerk of the body and a straightening of the man next to him.

There stood Sheriff Bud Cross in the doorway, with a long Colt in either hand, bearing full upon him!

"Stick 'em up, kid!" he said. "Stick 'em up, and pronto!"

"What's the matter?" asked Jim.

"A dead man is the matter," said Cross. "You fool, to think you could drop Larry and get away with it! Get up them hands!"

Slowly the hands of Fantom mounted. "You there, Clauson," barked the sheriff. "Stand up behind him and lay a gun ag'in the back of his neck!"

Clauson, unwillingly, rose. "This ain't of my choosin', Sheriff," said he, "but I suppose I gotta do what I'm told."

So he drew his gun; but as he did so, and stepped behind the chair, it seemed to Jim Fantom that he saw a narrow chance for escape. His feet found the cross-beam beneath the table, and suddenly he thrust out with all his might.

The table shot over on its farther side, bearing down two men before it. The lamp was dashed to bits, plunging the room into darkness just as the sheriff let off both guns. One bullet fairly kissed the ear of Fantom, the other shot thudded into the wall.

Meantime, that thrust of his feet had hurled Jim strongly back against Clauson. The man went down, groaning, but Fantom did not have him in mind. The sheriff was his danger. He could see the big man side-step out of the lighted square of the door, and Fantom went for him across the floor, crouched like a cat. The long barrel of his Colt rang along the head of Cross, and the sheriff went down on both knees.

No one blocked the door. Jim Fantom darted down the back hallway, burst through the rear door, and sprang to the ground without touching a step.

The stable was just before him. He found his bay pony. By the light of a

lantern on the wall, he noted the sweat streak, white along its hips, and wondered how much he had taken out of it during that day's ride. However, he had the saddle on its back before the thought was completed. He flung himself into the saddle, threw himself along the side of the mustang like an Indian, his revolver thrusting out under the neck of the animal.

IN THAT way, like a storm, he broke out of the door of the stable. He saw men streaking toward him, guns in hands. At sight of him, they stopped and threw themselves to the ground, except the sheriff, who stood erect and dropped his guns on the fugitive.

But Bud Cross was not half himself. Sharp pains still stabbed his head; he shot at a double image, as it were, and as the rider darted past him and around the corner of the hotel, he cast down his guns with a groan of disgust.

"Hoss and saddle, every one of you, or Burned Hill is gunna be a laughin' stock!"

Jim Fantom heard no more. He kept up full speed until he saw before him the woods. He entered them, turned, and looked back at Burned Hill. He could still hear a roar of distant voices and a pounding of hoofs, distinctly, but the whole flood of the sound of men and horses was streaming away to the east. Now let them burn up their speedsters, he thought. Let them ride them to death on the eastern trail, while he drifted comfortably to the west!

He drew the pony back to a steady jog until he came to a lake in the middle of the woods. Here he halted and made camp for the night. He found a good strip of pasture for the mustang.

When he awakened in the morning, the mustang was neighing softly—an inquisitive whine, as it were, and tossing his head as he looked to the east through the trees. Fantom got out of his blanket sleepily and, looking in the same direction, beheld a dozen riders coming out of the woods and riding by the edge of the lake. The leader was Bud Cross.

Fantom went madly to work. He dragged saddle and bridle onto the gelding, and leaped into the saddle and twisted the bay snakelike into the deeper recesses of the woods.

There was a small open glade beneath the slope of the hill, and this he ventured to cross, confident that the woods from behind would screen him from any observation. He was almost across, and entering the farther side, when the clanging report of a rifle smote sharply against his ears. So they had seen him, after all!

He gave one fleeting glance to the rear, and made out in three or four places the shadowy forms of the long-striding horses that worked behind him.

He must keep to the rough ground, if he hoped for life! So, to the rough ground he kept, edging higher along the slope until, like a handclap of a giant at his very ear, a Winchester spoke from a brake beside him. He reined the bay headlong down the slope, through scattering brush and trees, and saw three men flying behind him. And to the right, and before him, other guns were popping.

Fantom dodged through a dense tangle of brush; then down a sheer slope, sliding on his haunches. He rattled down a twisting gully at the bottom of the draw and, looking back, saw the posse come out of the upper edge of the woods.

There was nothing to do except to ride the bronco for all that it was worth, hoping for some branching gully from the main one down which he might dodge again.

The draw swept around a bend, and, as the turn was made, there started out before him a rider on a bay horse, who drove at full speed down the canyon. Fantom stared in amazement. It was a man dressed in every respect as he was dressed; the very sombrero which he wore was a white Stetson, like Fantom's, with a string of rawhide woven around the brim to give it stiffening! Even the look of his blanket roll behind the saddle was the same, with a yellow slicker strapped on top!

Suddenly, on the right, at the mouth of a small branching ravine, appeared Jonathan Quay, beckoning! Fantom did not pause to think. He swung into the ravine at the side of Quay and in a moment had lost sight of the main ravine around a sharp angle of the smaller gully. There Quay drew rein, and as they sat their horses, Fantom heard the roar of the pursuit, like a withdrawing wave, pass beyond earshot.

"What—" he began.

Quay smiled. "There'll be no more trouble," he said. "That young fellow who took your place knows how to ride a horse, and the horse he's on can travel. They won't catch him, but even if they should they'll see that they have the wrong man."

"And do what to him?"

"Nothing."

"You don't know Bud Cross," said Fantom grimly.

"I know Bud Cross very well. He'll made no trouble for Chip Lander."

"Chip Lander!" cried Fantom.

"He said that he knew you," answered Quay. "He was glad to do something for you, on account of a little argument that you and he had a long time ago, when you were boys. Is that right?"

"My head's spinning a mite," said the Phantom. "How did you manage to be here in the nick of time?"

DOES that seem like a miracle?" asked Quay gently. "I suppose it does, but if you were to take a bird's-eye view of Burned Hill and the lay of the land around it, you wouldn't be surprised. If you rode straight east, over the easy, rolling hills, they were sure to run you down in short order. If they caught you there, I couldn't help you until you were in jail. But if you turned in this direction, as I guessed that you would, either you'd get safely off into the upper country, above timberline, or else they would begin to hammer you in this region. With their faster horses, they would be apt to run you into this draw.

"At least, that was the way I guessed the game. And it happened to turn out that way. There was about one chance in four that Chip Lander and his horse would be useful at this spot at about this time. And as you see, the fourth chance was the one that turned up! No miracle—no miracle at all! And now, Jim Fantom, you're going to ride home with me."

Fantom, puzzled, looked into the bright eyes of Quay. Either this man was a saint, or a devil. "It's a mighty kind thing of you to ask me home with you, Mr. Quay," said he. "But I reckon that you ain't thought of all sides of it. You dunno the sort of trouble that I might get you into, if the sheriff was to find out—"

Panting and sweating, the boy began the job of filing the handcuffs off (Chap. X)

"That I am sheltering a man wanted by the law? Now, look here, my friend, I can see that you're putting me in scales and weighing me. You want to know why I have put myself out so much for your sake. Is that the fact?"

Fantom turned crimson, but he was sufficiently frank to answer:

"I guess that's right. It don't seem hardly nacheral for a man to do so much for a stranger!"

"It isn't natural," said Quay. "But if you see my home, you'll understand why I want you. In fact, I need all the brave men I can get together! You'll soon see what I mean if you come with me to my ranch."

"This sounds a mite better to me," said Fantom. "It ain't easy for me to go ahead until I can see around the corners of the thing that I'm doing. I'm sorry it's so, but that's the way of it!"

"I understand you perfectly," said Quay. "I don't want to force you. If you think that work for me would interest you, come along. There's another thing against it. I couldn't ask you to enter my employ unless I had your word that you would not think of leaving me before the next year is ended. We'd have to shake hands on that, in the beginning. It would be sixty dollars a month, and found."

Fantom was amazed. "I never heard of no cowpuncher getting pay like that!" he exclaimed.

"Of course you haven't. You've not often seen cowpunchers who have to ride herd one minute and fight rustlers the next, either. A year then, but only if the idea appeals to you."

"A year," muttered Fantom. "In a year a lot of things could happen, I suppose!"

"What is it that you're snubbed to on so short a line?" asked Quay. "What's so pleasant in the world that you couldn't take a chance and leave it for a year?"

Jim Fantom rubbed his chin. "Why, nothin', I suppose."

"Ah," said Quay instantly. "A girl. Now let me see. That pretty Dolan youngster in Burned Hill! Is that the one?"

"I never seen her but once," said Fantom gloomily.

"The more reason that you'll want to see her again. You couldn't make a better choice than that, Jim Fantom. Now you shake hands on staying with me for a year—no matter what ups and downs we have—and in return for that, I'll bring you that girl, and put you into a pleasant house with her, and marry her to you."

Jim Fantom was shocked back to an oath which he had not heard since the days of his childhood.

"Holy jumpin' Jupiter!" said Fantom. "What are you talkin' about?"

"I'm offering you a bargain. Give me your word of honor to obey orders for one year, and in exchange I offer you good wages, good keep, a house, a wife—the wife of your choosing! Now, then, Fantom, what is your decision?"

"If she—if Jo Dolan, I mean—if she's the kind that would pick up and marry anybody—" he stammered.

"Young man," said the other sternly, "can't you read character better than this? I know nothing about that girl—except that I can make her your wife, if you want!"

Jim Fantom threw up both his hands.

"Then get her!" said he. "I'm your man!"

III

IT WAS late in the day when they reached Quay Valley. The valley was flat-bottomed, with a lake in the center and a small stream running out from it. Little creeks and brooks streaked down from the upper lands and joined the larger bodies of water, and here and there a waterfall streamed in the air, its banner of white. All the rough upper slopes were covered with virgin timber, while below the forested ground came a wide belt of pasturage. The bottom of the valley was checked and rechecked by the patches of farm land. Young Jim Fantom saw and admired.

"You're pretty rich!" he said.

Quay shook his head. "It doesn't mean money to me," he asserted solemnly. "This is my kingdom, Jim. But as for money—how could I handle those crops at a profit, considering that there are no proper roads across the mountains? I'd have to haul that wheat, for instance, sixty miles."

"You don't waste it?" exclaimed Jim.

"No, we don't waste it. There's the granaries down yonder."

"Where the river cuts out of the lake?"

"Yes."

"It's a big enough set of buildings!"

With a pleasant thrill, the boy looked up and down the valley, which they were so high above that it seemed as if he could hold it in his outstretched arms.

"You're stocked up with everything, I suppose?" said he. "What are the smaller buildings down there in that circle?"

"Why, one is the store. And that smaller cabin is the blacksmith shop. I have a blacksmith down there who can make you anything between a wrought-iron grill and a stiletto. He's a master, is old Josh Wilkes!"

"That's your headquarters, then?"

"Yes, that's what you might call town. The boys have named it Quayville. Well, from Quayville just west down the bank of the lake—there on the far side—is my house. You see, it's not pretentious, simply a log cabin, though it's a bit larger than the others. However, my men live as well as I do."

"In those cottages?"

Here and there in the valley, there were cottages dotted in pleasant locations.

"Yes," said Quay, "wherever you see a cottage, you can take it for granted that it's occupied by a happy family of my friends. Perhaps you've heard of—"

"I've heard of the Quay Reform Colony!" broke out Fantom, striking his knuckles against his forehead. "What a fool I was to forget about it! But look here, do you mean to tell me that every doggone one of those cottages has a crook livin' in it?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the other. "I should say not! It's my hope that every man in the valley is as honest as the world needs to find him." He laughed a little as he said this. "There are people down there who have turned over a completely new leaf in life. See that cottage by the creek, yonder? Joe Porsons lives in that with his wife."

"I never heard of Porsons."

"He was in prison for eleven years for a gunfight in Texas. It was his tenth man, and the judge thought that Joe ought to take a rest." Again Quay laughed, and somehow Fantom grew a little uneasy. "Now do you see the cottage with the green roof? That's where Mack Rhiner lives."

"Rhiner the murderer?"

"Tut, tut!" said Quay. "He's as steady a man as you'd like to see, now! Married, too, and very happy. Married men in all those cottages. That is to say, in all of the ones that are occupied. I have in mind the very one for you and your girl."

"Look here, Mr. Quay," said the boy, delighted but rather overawed, "you were joking when you said that about Jo Dolan, of course!"

"Joking! Not a bit. Come down with me to my house. You'll stay there for a while, until your own is put in order. Mind you, Jim, this is to be a one-year's experiment, and at the end of that time, if either of us doesn't like the bargain, the deal can be called off. How does it sound to you?"

"It sounds to me," said the boy slowly, "like a dream. A queer kind of a dream. I'm waiting to wake up!"

Quay chuckled.

"You'll be sure of one year of that dream, anyway," said he. "And perhaps for the rest of your life! That is, if you like the idea of this sort of a life. There's one other condition, though. Whatever arrangement I've made with you, my boy, is to be kept a secret. Is that understood?"

"Mr. Quay," said Fantom, "you picked me up when I was a gone goose, and gave me another chance. Whatever happens, I'll go the way you point."

THERE was no answer from Quay to this emotional outburst. They rode on together down into the valley, across a bridge and into virgin forest until they came suddenly upon a small clearing, in the midst of which there was a log cabin, with a stout shed behind it. A streak of water, beginning beside the cabin door, trickled across the open and was lost under the shadow of the forest.

The horse of the Phantom stopped. Instinctively he had reined it in to stare at the place.

"Well?" asked Quay.

Jim Fantom made a little gesture. "It sort of hits me in the eye," said he.

"Do you like it, my son?"

"I mean," explained Jim Fantom, "to be sinking an ax into those trees, and clearing the ground, to be making it your own—that would be something! Who lives here, Mr. Quay?"

"No one," said Quay. He started his

horse on, and added, as Fantom joined him, "I'm getting it ready now for a new man."

They left the dark of the woods and came into the open. Straight ahead appeared an avenue of trees, beyond it the front of a large cabin, of logs also.

"My house," said Quay. "But it's sort of a clubhouse for the boys, too. They're free to go where they like in it, except that Kendal shuts down on them, now and then. He likes quiet, does Kendal."

"Kendal?"

"Louis Kendal. He's in charge of everything for me. I have to be away a good deal—as on this trip, you see. So Kendal takes charge in the valley, and he gives the orders. You'll obey Kendal as you would me." They jogged slowly up the road toward the house. "Kendal's idea," said Quay. "When the ground was cleared, he left this double row of the big tres. He wanted me to build a real mansion at the other end of it, but I couldn't let him have his way as far as that. For my part, I'd be as happy in a tent. Here we are, Jim."

It was a long, low building to which they had come, and, rounding this, they arrived at a barn, in front of which a man was watering a string of four horses at a trough.

"Chip Lander!" cried Quay. "How did you manage to get here so soon?"

The young fellow waved a hand to them, and laughed. "Mack Rhiner was right on hand with a relay of fresh horses five miles from the start. I had that gang of the sheriff's pretty sick and dizzy by that time, anyway, and when I got into the saddle on a brand new hoss, why, Mack and me simply walked away from 'em. We used the short cut in from the south side. There was no use goin' all the way around."

"Use enough!" said Quay in rebuke. "Are you trying to lead the sheriff straight in on us, Chip?"

"Him?" said Lander uneasily. "Aw, he'll never guess!"

Quay said no more, but dismounted in obvious displeasure. He led his horse into the barn, but Jim Fantom remained behind. He said to Lander:

"You fished me out of boiling water, Chip. I was nearly cooked when you popped up in the way!"

"I was mighty glad of the chance," said Lander. "And I'm glad to have you here. You'll be stayin' here at the main house, I guess? You ain't a married man, Jim?"

"No."

"We might throw in together, then, unless His Nibs gives you a room by yourself."

"Mr. Quay?"

"No. I mean that long slice of the devil, Kendal! He has the say around here about everything, as you'll soon find out."

"You don't like him?"

"Him? Like him? Well—I've talked too much already!" said Lander. "Come along and I'll show you the hang of things in the barn."

IN THE barn, which had stall room for a dozen horses or more on a side, and a capacious mow in the center, Lander pointed out the situation of the feed box and the saddle room.

He tethered his four horses and then forked down some hay to Fantom's bay. After that, he came down from the mow by the ladder and joined Jim.

"How long have you been here?" asked the latter.

"Why, about five months," said Lander. They sauntered from the barn together as Lander continued. "I was in Montana in the town of New Lincoln. The day before, twelve gents had stood up and said that I'd been guilty of manslaughter, which is a funny thing to call the killin' of a Swede that already had me down with a knife at my throat, eh?"

"Yeah. They ought to of given you a medal for that, Chip!"

"The judge did. He give me a ten-year medal. I had one more night in jail before they shipped me to the pen, and that night my door clinked and opened. It was this Louis Kendal. He comes slippin' in, unlocks my irons, and whispers to me to foller him. Aw, he's slick, that Kendal! He brought me up through the hills and never said a word to me. I didn't know whether he wanted to set me free or cut my throat, until we met up with old Mr. Quay on the road. It was him that had sent Kendal, of course! There's as much gold in him as there is steel in Kendal!"

"He's the pure quill, all right," said Fantom, as a door screeched open ahead and a gong was banged.

"Come and get it! Come and get it!"

They hurried for the house.

Jonathan Quay was warming himself before the fire in the dining room when the two came in, but Fantom gave him hardly a glance. For the door had opened at the farther end of the room at that moment. Framed in the shadows, he saw for the first time the long, pale face of Louis Kendal. Quay introduced them in a cheerful voice, and Kendal came forward slowly with eyes like coals glowing in phosphorous. Instantly, with all his heart, Jim Fantom loathed the man and feared him. A cold and bony hand gripped his, closing slowly with a suggestion of great strength. Then they turned to the table and sat down.

During the meal Jim was aware that Quay had been talking for some time, telling pale Louis Kendal all about him, while Kendal never lifted his eyes or nodded his head.

"How many men have you killed?" he suddenly said in a twanging voice, startlingly loud.

Fantom started angrily. Quay seemed anxious.

"Don't misunderstand Kendal," he assured Fantom. "Louis has a dry way, but he's vitally interested in you and your problems as I am. But I can answer for you. There was an affair in Tombstone. A pair of Mexicans looking for trouble."

"There were four of them Mexicans," said Kendal.

"You know the details of that affair better than I do," remarked Quay. "Well, then, out of the four two were killed. Then there were the affairs of Lynch and Harry Lord. I think that's about all. Four men, let us say, Jim, not counting young Phelan."

"I didn't touch Phelan," broke in Fantom.

"Very well, very well!" said Quay hastily. "We won't argue about that. But it's the viewpoint of the law, I suppose we may say? You wouldn't feel lucky if the sheriff had you for that death, would you?"

"No," said Fantom slowly. "Why did you ask about killings, Kendal?"

"You was eighteen when you went to the pen," said Kendal. "I was just thinkin' that was a tidy lot for a kid of eighteen. No harm in thinkin', is there?"

"No harm, I guess," muttered Fantom.

The cook was refilling the coffee cups when the door opened with a jerk and a man in scarred leather chaps panted:

"Bud Cross! He's comin' down the valley! Whacha say, Kendal? Do we get him or let him come through?"

"You better ask the boss," said Louis Kendal.

"The sheriff!" said Quay. "Did he ride down the road?"

"He came over the south pass."

Quay turned reproachful eyes upon Chip Lander. "How far away is he now?"

"About a half mile."

"Tut, tut!" said Quay, only mildly dismayed. "Has he many men with him?"

"Only four," said the other. "We could blot them up as easy as nothing if you say the word to—"

"Blot them up?" echoed Quay. "Young man, how little you know me! No, no! Let them come on, freely." He waved toward the table.

"Perhaps we'd better have everything taken away, except the dishes for two. Cook, will you manage that? Chip and Jim, I'm afraid that the sheriff would

[*Turn page*]

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be too much interested if he should find you here with me. May I ask you to step into the next room? Everything will be all right. Don't be alarmed in the least. This is unlucky, that's all!"

So Jim Fantom and Lander crowded into the next room, closing the heavy door behind them. In darkness they waited, standing close to the door.

From the distance, Fantom heard the noise of hoofs. He had an almost irresistible impulse to flee. But he remembered his word to Jonathan Quay. For one year his body and his soul lay in the hand of that man! He could not stir without orders. . . .

THERE was a silence in the next room, broken only by a gradual pulse of a footfall up and down the floor. By a slight drag of the heels, a slight jingle of spurs, Fantom recognized the slouching gait of tall Louis Kendal, pacing like a beast in the cage.

Close to the house the hoofs drummed heavily, then paused.

"They're here!" he heard Kendal say.

A door slammed. Heels clanked into the dining room.

"Why," called out Quay cheerfully, "glad to see you, Sheriff Cross! And the rest of you boys. Sit down and have something to eat—or have you come here to eat me!"

The voice of Bud Cross came gloomily. "I ain't after you, Mr. Quay. But I'm after one that I figger is somewhere in the valley, here. Young Jim Fantom."

"Ah, you mean the lad I saw in Burned Hill?"

"Look here," broke in Kendal; "what's Fantom done? He's just out of the pen, ain't he?"

"He's killed Larry Phelan," said the sheriff, "and he's gonna hang for it. I dunno that I have your name, stranger?"

"Louis Kendal."

"Well, Kendal, what's your business?"

"Sort of straw boss for Mr. Quay, here."

The sheriff said, impatiently: "The fact is, Mr. Quay, that everybody knows what you're doin' up here. You're tryin' to take the boys when they get loose from the pen and keep them from goin' wrong again. It's a fine job. But they's a side of it that ain't so sweet. Some says that you sometimes don't wait for a gent to get loose from the law. You put out your hand and save him. Is that right?"

"Ah, I see," said Quay. "You mean that I deliberately take in men that the law is still hunting?"

The sheriff grunted.

"Here's this kid, this Fantom. We have him fallin' into our hands. We can almost reach out and tag him. His hoss is all in. Then suddenly he's scootin' away from us as though he had wings —or a new hoss! He fades out into the mountains. We pick up his trail again, and it comes through broken ground right down into this here valley. There you are! It looks like he considered this place home."

"You're goin' to search the house for him, are you, Cross?" Louis Kendal muttered.

"I'm not goin' to be such a fool. If Fantom come here, he's already tucked himself off in the woods. I can't pick him up, this day. And another thing, Mr. Quay. We know that you have got a lot of ex-thugs here—safe-crackers an' thieves an' train robbers, an' out and out murderers. You've brought their wives up here and settled 'em down where they'll be a mighty long distance from temptation. All right! But now they's another side of the picture!"

"I'll be glad to have you paint it for me," said the other gently.

"I'll do my best," went on Bud Cross. "Around here, in Leffingwell, an' Trail's End, an' in Black Rock, an' in Chalmer's City, there have been bank robberies, stage holdups on the roads, all kinds of monkeyshines. They've busted into Thompson's store in Leffingwell, and left Thompson bleedin' to death on the floor. They've done a lot of other jobs like that one. There was the bank in Chalmer's City. A fine new safe, a good pair of watchmen on the job, but the watchmen are got, an' the safe blowed as easy as though it was made out of tissue paper!"

"These are very unpleasant things you tell me," said Quay. "Will you tell me what they point toward?"

"I'll tell you," said the sheriff. "I'll tell you, because I want you to know what I think you don't know! Now, then, you've got a flock of ex-crooks in this valley. Do they stay here all the time?"

"It's not a prison," said Quay. They

go off hunting in the hills, now and then; fishing, too!" Quay frowned. "Are you suggesting that my men steal out of the valley and—actually raid the surrounding country?"

"I don't accuse nothin'. All that I gotta say is that inside of the past five years, every good-sized town within two days' ride of your Happy Valley here, has been raided, one way or another."

"Good heavens!" muttered Quay. "Louis, is it possible?"

"Possible?" said the loud, twanging voice of Kendal. "Anything's possible with a gang of ex-thugs. You ain't able to change their spots for 'em. But we'll watch 'em like a cat watches mice, Sheriff!"

"The sneakin' hyprocite!" murmured Lander.

Bud Cross and his men left at once. The sheriff refused all invitations to spend the night, for he wished to get well started back toward civilization before the morning came. If not in the valley, he was sure that Jim Fantom would now be well on the way north toward the Canadian border.

IV

IN THE morning, Quay was gone. There was left only Louis Kendal to start Fantom in his new life. Kendal was crisp and curt.

"What can you do?" he asked at the breakfast table. "Can you work cows?"

"I guess I can't. I'd be mighty glad to learn."

"Got no time for schoolwork here. What *can* you do?"

"I'll do anything," said Fantom. "I don't care where I start. You gimme an ax and feed trees to me. I'll cut firewood. I'll run a cross-cut."

"Or say, handle a plow?"

"Glad to—like to! I wanta get close down to the ground."

Kendal laughed. "You'll ride a hoss and use a gun!" he said tersely. "That's what you'll do! You get your hoss and oil up your rifle. We got a lot of sheep lost every year from the coyotes. Go up there and fetch me six coyote scalps, and I'll call that a day's work!"

He took Fantom to the open door and indicated the northern hills. Six coyotes were no small order for any man to bag with a rifle in a day's hunting, but Jim vowed to himself that he would not return until he had performed the work.

Jim hurried out to his horse, loaded his rifle, and started away. He held on into the upper hills until he came to the sheep grounds, where big herds were closely grazing over rich grass. Among the rocks beyond the flocks he dismounted and began to cut for sign. Luck came to him. He had reached a veritable army of coyotes in their own network of holes in the ground. And there he worked, probed, and sweated, and took snap shots at fleeting, tawny shadows.

He was a good shot, though a little out of practice, but with twenty chances in the course of the day, he could collect only seven scalps. When he got back to the house, both Chip Lander and Kendal were gone. The cook prepared supper for him alone.

"Did you buy some of these?" he asked, when he saw the trophies.

"Look at 'em," suggested Fantom.

The cook, with hairy, tattooed hands, turned them over.

"All fresh as eggs," he declared. "You're gonna be at home up here, if you get by with that Kendal. But it looks like he means trouble for you, maybe."

"How come?"

"Why, that's his old gag for them he don't like. He sends 'em up to go after the coyotes, and mostly they get a headache and nothin' but a smell of gunpowder to bring back with 'em. How'd you happen to come up here, anyway?"

"A friend of mine was shot in Burned Hill. I got the glory," said Fantom briefly. "And you?"

"Well, sir, that's a story," said the cook. "But—"

"Like it here?" asked Fantom.

"I like it fine! Except Kendal, damn his heart! Nobody likes him, I guess!"

The cook went off sourly to the kitchen, and Fantom went out into the crimson heart of the sunset. He wandered aimlessly across the fields, then followed a twisting lane into the woods. So he came, unawares, on the cabin which had charmed him the night before.

It resounded with the noise of hammers. Three men were putting together a rough-hewn table in the center of the room. It was a big room, with a capacious fireplace at the farther side.

Chairs of the same fashioning as the table stood here and there. A fresh smell of new wood greeted him.

"Hello," said Fantom," you boys are workin' late."

The chief of the three looked up.

"Rush order," said he. "One of Quay's pets movin' in. Who are you, stranger?"

"Jim Fantom."

"I'm Josh Wilkes. Glad to know you. When your pony needs new shoes, I'll be seein' you again. This house ain't for you, Fantom?"

"No. Not for me."

THEY left, piled their tools into a buckboard which was standing in front of the cabin, and drove away.

Jim Fantom remained behind, and hungrily circled the cabin. He never had seen a thing in his life that he wanted as much as he wanted this place.

Bitterly, he envied the man who would have it.

He remained there until the darkness was complete and he could no longer see the runlet of water from the spring, only hear its whisper at his feet. Then he turned back.

When he reached the house, he saw in the kitchen the lank form of Kendal, with the seven coyote scalps in his hands. He appeared to be studying them with an intense interest, thoughtfully, squinting as though at small type.

Kendal put his finger through a bullet hole. "You only got five of 'em through the head," said he.

"They were all runnin'," answered Fantom.

The cook guffawed. "He was havin' an off day. He missed two heads out of seven!"

"I missed thirteen of 'em clean and altogether," confessed Fantom.

"You missed thirteen an' you got seven, an' five through the head," said Kendal dryly, as though stating a problem for solution. "Are you tired?"

"Not much."

"Do you know the Creston Road?"

"Never heard of it."

"The doctor, here," said Kendal, "he'll show you the way to it. I'll tell you what you'll do when you get there. Doc, go out and saddle a couple of hosses. And get two led hosses. Hop to it!"

The cook grunted and instantly left the kitchen.

Kendal went on, still thumbing over the coyote scalps: "When you get there, change your saddle onto the best of the led hosses an' send the cook home. After you've done that, you ride down the Creston Road for a couple of miles until the woods break away an' you come into the open. There'll only be a few scatterings of brush and saplings. Find a place that'll give cover to you and your hoss, and wait till the Creston stage comes along.

"In that stage there won't be more'n one man outside of the driver. Take a look at that man as the stage goes by. If he's small, and has got a lump on his back, you sashay out from your cover, after the stage is past, and ride up alongside. You stop that stage and take the hunchback out of it. You savvy?"

"I hear what you're sayin'," Fantom said.

"Take him out, cut a hoss out of the harness, and put the runt on his back. Then you break off through the woods, headin' east. Afterward, circle around and come back onto the road that leads back into the valley. Bring that gent in here with you. You foller me?"

"You want a little job of murder done. Is that all?" asked Fantom.

"I want the crookback, that's all. That's all you gotta know."

Fantom shrugged his shoulders. "Is that the regular game here?" he asked.

"You've got your marchin' orders," said Kendal tersely. "Start on your way!"

Abruptly he got up and slouched from the room with his peculiar gait, the heels of his boots dragging on the floor, the spurs jingling softly.

Fantom remained at a stand. It was not of Kendal that he was thinking at this moment. It was Quay who filled his mind. He had given his solemn word to be Quay's man for a year, and almost the first of Quay's commands had been that he should yield an implicit obedience to Louis Kendal. But he wondered what an expression of bewilderment would come over the face of Jonathan Quay, if he should learn of this present errand!

AT THE Creston Road, Fantom changed horses and sent back the cook as instructed, then, at the edge of the great wood, took cover in a close cluster of lodge-pole pines.

Jim Fantom smiled in his concealment. He handled his weapons softly and surely, without a tremor, as far up among the trees, he heard a distinct rattling of chains, then the groan of a hub on an axle of steel. The next instant the leaders of the stagecoach trotted into the open.

It was an old-fashioned conveyance, and on the lofty seat was an old driver without a guard. The stage drew closer. Fantom heard a woman's laughter peal suddenly; then the open seats of the stage were in view, containing two women and one man.

The man was gesturing to the woman beside him. It seemed as though a pillow had been stuffed under his coat and fastened between the shoulder blades.

Rapidly, as the stage lumbered past, Fantom knotted his bandana over his nose and mouth. The stage swung into the dark of the woods beyond, and Fantom went into the saddle like a jumping cat. Rapidly he gained, and suddenly he was beside the stage. He dropped the reins over the pommel of the saddle; both his hands were occupied with Colts.

"Halt, and hands up!"

It was the hunchback who occupied the attention of Jim Fantom. He had twisted in his seat and reached back for a gun with a lightning movement. But with his hand at his hip, there it froze in place, for he saw the leveled, steady gun in the right hand of Fantom looking him in the eye. Meanwhile the tired stage horses had slowed to a halt; the brakes groaned; the coach was still. The stillness was broken only by the weeping and blubbering of the two women. It angered Fantom.

"You fools!" he exclaimed. "Be quiet! You there, driver—get those hands over your head! Here, you in the back seat, get out of this!"

The hunchback climbed carefully down to the ground—not an easy thing to do while his arms were stiffly erected above his head.

"Get up there and cut out the near leader from the traces," he commanded the hunchback.

He sidestepped the gray horse a little forward until he could sit at ease, facing all the people of the stage. The hunchback freed the lead horse; he turned and faced his captor. It was a long, white, bloodless face. Great dark pouches hung beneath the eyes, and the eyes, even in the moonlight, appeared covered with film, like the eyes of a dead fish.

"Climb on that hoss!" Fantom commanded.

The hunchback tried, and failed. He had to lead the animal up to the step of the stage, and from this he managed to scramble awkwardly up to the back of the horse.

"Ride ahead—straight into the woods—there—go east!"

The hunchback obeyed. Fantom followed his captive into the shadows of the woods, then came with him into a clearing.

"Halt and hoist your arms ag'in!" said Fantom.

"You might as well finish the business now," said the hunchback calmly. "I don't care how you shoot me. Front or back. But what's the tomfoolery about having my hands up?"

Fantom nudged the muzzle of a revolver into the man's back.

"That persuade you?" he asked.

The body of the hunchback quaked—with laughter! Utter amazement flowed through the mind of Fantom, and chilled his blood, also. This was madness, surely. But the hands shot up. Dexterously, Fantom "fanned" him. He located a revolver in a hip pocket and drew it forth—a dainty, nickeled thing, fit more for a woman than for a man's grasp.

"Ah, it's the gun, the gun!" said the hunchback. "I should have drawn it in the first moment. But then, I saw death in your Colt, my young friend, and that dissuaded me."

"Look here," said Fantom, "you ain't gunna be murdered, if that's what's gallin' you so much! But we got no time to stand here an' chatter. You can turn your hoss, now, and drift west ag'in. I can hear the rumble of the stage. Old Grandpa yonder, is drivin' on with his four hosses!"

"It's to be on the road to the Happy Valley, then?" said the prisoner, as he obediently turned his horse in the bidden direction. "I'm to ride on, and the final bullet will come at the moment when hope is restored to me in part. Is that the plan? Well, it's worthy of Louis. He always was a master of such situations!"

It sent a chill through the blood of

Fantom to hear the man speak in this manner.

"You're ridin' safe when you're ridin' with me!" he said. "That's final! Now ride on!"

THE PRISONER clucked to his horse and they went on. At length they came out onto the road and jogged their horses along it.

"Young man," said the prisoner suddenly, "I think you're a truth-teller! I think you mean what you say."

"Thanks," said Fantom ironically.

"He's sent you down here to get me, and never told you a word about what he intends to do with me."

"That's true," said Fantom, and then bit his lip.

"It's plain to me," went on the other, "that you have faith in your ability to escort me safely into the Happy Valley? How long have you known my dear Louis?"

"Two days," said Fantom. Then he broke in sternly, "We'll have no more questionin', stranger. I don't know you, an' you don't know me. An' that's the end of it, I figger."

"I don't know you?" said the other. "Let me see! Let me see. If I could turn back to the right page—somewhere before this I've seen the same face—very stern for the years that it owns. A young face and a bitter look—penitentiary stuff, I'd say! I have it now. James Fantom, as I live! James Fantom, stage robber, gunman extraordinary—three men down—betrayed by a pair of rascally companions—penitentiary—"

Fantom bit his lip.

"You know me, stranger," he said. "I don't know you. I dunno that I want to know you. But I figger that no good comes out of the talk."

The hunchback turned sideways upon his horse and considered the boy. "Young, hard, embittered," he continued. "Why, yes, there's the very material that Louis would be hungry to put his hands on. And this same night to send you down here alone, to stop a stagecoach with two armed men in it—there's the test. No, I don't doubt that Louis has known you only two days. But by the end of this second day he will know that you're the man for him."

He stopped, and, laughing suddenly with a strange malevolence, he rubbed his hands together. "Unless," he said, "Louis should take it into his head that perhaps I had talked to you too much! Then, perhaps, he would think it as well to brush out all possibilities of danger. He would kill me, and then kill the last shadow that I cast upon the ground. In fact, young man, perhaps you ride at this moment in a danger almost as great as mine!"

As he spoke, he thrust a bony forefinger at the boy.

"But we'll soon see," said the hunchback, "for there are guns waiting for us in that clump of brush just ahead!"

Fantom looked straight before him up the road. Keen as a bird, Fantom saw one small bough pressed to the side. That was enough.

"Stranger, I figger that you're right. Somebody's layin' for you, or for us both, up there in the brush. They won't shoot, yet. They'll wait till we come closer. Now, then, just drift your hoss over to the side of the road."

"That side, then," said the hunchback.

"No, the side closest to the bush," said Fantom. "They'll suspect less, that way."

"And have an easier shot!" said the hunchback.

"Do as I tell you!" snapped Fantom. "Edge to the left. And if there's murder in the air, my hand's for you!"

The hunchback was tense. "If I live," he said, "you'll have a reason one day to be thankful that you've done this for me. If I live!" he repeated.

They slanted their horses gradually toward the left-hand side of the road. Fantom studied the threatening bush ahead, and suddenly he saw distinctly through a gap among the boughs a straightened finger of steel.

"Spurs!" he said to the hunchback, and leaped the gray horse for cover.

At the same instant a wasp sound stung the air beside his head. Another, and a jerk at his hat. Then a double report cracked in his ear. He looked about for the hunchback. But the latter was gone!

His captive had escaped, and he was almost tempted to plunge in pursuit, but between him and the other wall of the forest lay the blank and gleaming stretch of the road. Already he had had two bullets sent his way! No, decidedly he would not venture out upon the naked road. Let the hunchback go. It might

also be that the captive had been right when he said that Louis Kendal would strive to wipe out prisoner and captor at one moment. If so, the trap had failed. How, then, would Kendal face him on his return?

There were no further shots. Cautiously, he started working up through the woods along the weary way back to the valley.

V

WHEN Fantom entered the kitchen and the cook turned toward him, a sleepy yawn altered suddenly to surprise and keenest inquiry.

"How was everything, kid? Nothin' happened wrong?"

Fantom went to the stove and sniffed the steaming coffee.

"What do you think, Doctor?" he asked. "Lemme have a cup of this stuff."

The cook obediently poured out the inky liquid.

"What do I think?" he repeated. "I dunno what to think, Fantom. But I know that Kendal's in the front room lookin' whiter and sicker than ever!"

Fantom swallowed the coffee at a gulp. All of his suspicions were instantly confirmed, as he strode off through the house and came to the room where Kendal sat by the window.

"Kendal," he said, "you tried to trap me. You've sent me out to hunt game and tried to bag me when I was bringin' it in!"

Not an eyelid of Kendal stirred. He remained fixed in contemplation. Fantom stepped closer.

"Kendal," he said, "are you gunna try to bluff me out like this—like a fool, or a baby?"

He touched the shoulder of the man as he spoke.

There was no flesh in that shoulder; it was all bone and sinew, hard as iron. But now the tendons twitched and a long hand closed upon the wrist of Fantom; the finger tips thrust into the flesh and found the bone. It was such a grip as he would not have credited, except from a giant or a madman.

"When I'm thinking, Fantom, let me be!" said Kendal, loosening the hand of the boy. "You've had your job cut out for you, and you failed at it!"

"You were there. You saw!" exclaimed Fantom. "Kendal, I think you were the one that sent the bullets at my head!"

"At you?" said Kendal, and suddenly laughed. "You?" he repeated. "Shoot at a thing like you, when *he* was there?"

It was an appalling thing to see, this laughter. His jaws sagged, and his lips twitched back, but only a panting sound came forth. Jim Fantom strove to speak again, yet he did not find a word to say. His legs of their own volition carried him toward the door. His hand opened it.

He walked, he did not care where, but away from the house. He did not see where he went. The great dark forest arose before him, but it seemed a cheerful thing to him, compared with the soul of Louis Kendal. He hurried on, breathing deeply, shaking his head from time to time, like a dog newly out of icy water. And so he found himself suddenly on the horizon of a song!

It came to him delicately small with distance, the singing of a child or a woman. He went forward, guided by the sound as by a light. Finally he came to the edge of a clearing and saw there a small log cabin with sheds behind it, and a silver streak of water across it, bubbling up with an audible murmur from beside the door.

That door was open. Through it the singing poured, and presently the singer herself appeared, a girl in a blue gingham dress, with a bucket in her hand.

She gave a gasp when she saw him, and the bucket dropped to the ground.

"Hello!" she called. "How did you come here, Jim Fantom?"

It was Josephine Dolan.

He went stumbling across the clearing toward her. He could not see his way, but only the girl, her brightness, her laughter, and the streaking of morning mist across the trees behind her.

"But you," said Fantom, "how are you here? Oh, I see. Your father has moved up here. I should have thought of that!"

He half choked in relief, for the first thought had been that she had come here for another man—he for whom Quay had built the house.

"My dad!" chuckled the girl. "My dad up here in the Happy Valley? That's likely, ain't it? What's dad done that Mr. Quay should have to save him, or want to save him? It's the lucky ones like you that he's interested in! You

fellows who are long riders and take the long chances—and here you wind up in the Happy Valley!"

SHE LAUGHED again. A sterner thread of fear made him say: "If it's not your father, then who is it? You can't be up here alone, I s'pose?"

"Here? With these woods all around? I should say not! I'm up here to be married, Jim."

"Married?"

"Well, it's not as bad as all that, I hope," said the girl. "Has to be some time."

"Yes," said the boy huskily. "Of course you'd have to marry, some time."

"And up here in the Happy Valley," said she, "there's no rent. That puts us a jump ahead of the game."

"Who's the man?" he asked suddenly.

"Why, you know him," she said.

Suddenly the handsome face of Chip Lander jumped into his mind. He, too, was from Burned Hill.

"Maybe I do," he muttered.

"He's been pretty bad," said the girl, "but I suppose that Mr. Quay will make him tame enough."

"He ain't been settled long, then?"

"Oh, no, not long."

It was Chip Lander, then, a newcomer in the valley!

"I'll take the bucket in for you," said he.

He picked it up and carried it into the house, through the door into the kitchen. That room was transformed. Not in actual form or contents but a spirit had entered it. A fire hummed in the stove, a sweet scent of cinnamon was in the air. On the surface of a white-scrubbed mixing board on the table was a thin layer of biscuit dough, rolled out ready for the cutting.

"You—you've started things going," he said.

"Well, I have to pitch in and see how thing'll go," said she.

"Ay," he answered. "Before the wedding, I guess."

"Yes, before the wedding."

"When will that be?"

"Well, I dunno exactly. But pretty quick, I suppose. I've been up all night getting things ready. D'you want to see?"

"Well, I'd sort of like to."

She led him into the dining-living room. On the hearth a fire had been kindled, and the flames weltered low.

"I wanted to try the flue. It works fine, you see. It's going to be a warm house when the winter snows come. It'll be snug, don't you think?"

"Why, I guess it will," said he.

"I hope you'll be here a lot."

"Me?"

"Yes. We could talk about Burned Hill, and folks down there."

"I'm gunna make a trip," he said. "I've gotta make a long trip. I won't be here."

She was smiling at him, half-quizzically and half doubtfully. "Well, that would be too bad. I sort of counted on you. Here's the other room."

They went into the bedroom. There big photographs were on the wall of a gentleman with drooping mustache, and a tight-waisted woman.

"Dad and mother to keep an eye on me," said the girl. "They make it sort of more homelike. That coverlet came all the way from Boston. It was handmade at home. It's sort of cheerful."

"Ay, it's sort of cheerful," he said dismally.

The whole room was filled with beauty, it seemed to his hungry soul. The very pattern of the rag rug upon the floor was to him a marvel, and a sad marvel. Other feet would tread upon it, other eyes would dwell upon its rioting colors. And it seemed to the boy that the infinite patience which had gone into the making of this rug was a symbol of the past out of which this girl had come. She came from a stock of home lovers. So it was that she had given to this house, in an instant, a touch beyond his imagining. He turned gloomily away.

"I'm pretty much afraid you don't like it," she said.

"Like it? Like it?" muttered Fantom thickly.

"You don't think it'll please him?"

AND THEN Jim Fantom went mad in a sudden stroke. He caught her close to him and held her soft beneath his hands, until the warmth of her body came to him and the fragrance from her hair was in his face. A hand of iron found her chin and forced her head back. She did not struggle. Her eyes were closed.

It seemed to Jim Fantom that he had been walled out and excluded from

her life by this fact more than by lofty walls of stone. Holding her in his arms, she still was a thousand leagues from him.

"Look!" said he. "I'm a swine. I never should of touched you, even with my eyes. But I love you. I'm gunna go. I won't see you again. Him—if he wants satisfaction—he can come and kick me in the face. He's got the right—"

He whirled away from her. His shoulders crashed against the side of the door, spinning him over the threshold, and so he ran blundering across the clearing, wishing in his heart that he never had seen this place, the valley, the girl's face, yet knowing there was nothing in life remaining so precious to him as the thought of this.

When he came to the house again, his brain had cleared a little. As he neared it, he saw the tall form of Louis Kendal striding up and down outside. He paused as the boy drew nearer, and said brusquely:

"Get into the buckboard—you'll find it in that shed. Harness the pair of buckskin broncs at the end of the east side of the barn. You see that pile of rusty plowshares? Take 'em down to the village and give 'em to Wilkes to be sharpened. Tell him I want 'em back by tonight. While you're down there, get three boxes of half-inch copper rivets. Here's the order for them."

He extended a slip of paper to Fantom, and the latter took it in silence. As he turned away, Kendal snapped at him:

"One minute!"

Fantom turned back.

"You're here maybe to stay," said Kendal. "All right. Now keep a head on your shoulders. What's happened between us, I'll put out of my head. You do the same, and we'll get on. If you don't, I'll make you think the Happy Valley is a happy hell. That's all!"

He did not wait to hear the reaction of the boy, but continued his striding back and forth, deep in the solution of his problem. That problem, as Fantom could guess clearly enough, had something to do with the mysterious hunchback. And pondering on this, he grew so absent-minded that, when he came to the barn and the buckskin mustangs, his head was nearly clipped from his shoulders by the flying heels of the off horse.

That wakened him to reality. He paid heed to himself as he tossed the harness upon them and led them out into the open, as tough and cunning a pair as ever he had handled. The buckboard was soon drawn out from the wagon shed, but it took ten or fifteen minutes of backing and filling to get the broncos into their positions. At last they were hitched, the plowshares piled in, and away went Fantom down the drive.

The mustangs, their tails switching with vicious energy, leaned on the bits, shouldering out as the mighty pull of Fantom dragged their heads together, and so they flew down the road, sometimes breaking from a trot into a humpbacked gallop.

He could not help wondering, as the wheels crunched and whirred upon the stones of the road, whether Mr. Louis Kendal had had some hidden purpose in assigning him to such a team as this. The white flank of a tree was enough to make them bound like deer into the ditch, almost overturning the wagon, and the clangor of the spilled heap of plowshares in the body of the vehicle frightened them back into the middle of the road.

For a moment they were uncontrollable, leaping ahead in a panic. But the strong hands and the cunning craft of Fantom sufficed to reduce their gait again. Into the village he came at last, standing up, with his feet almost jammed through the footboards, and his arm and leg muscles aching from the strain. Yet he managed to bring the team to a prancing halt in front of the blacksmith shop.

JOSH WILKES came out, grinning widely. "You've got the Dynamiters, have you?"

"Is that what they're called?" asked Fantom.

"Sure. The last time that they were hitched up they exploded poor Bill Watkins into a blackberry patch and blew the wagon into the lake. The Dynamiters ain't been used since then. How come you picked 'em out?"

"They was give to me," said Fantom.

"Was it Kendal that throwed 'em at you?"

"Ay."

"Well, maybe he's got a lot of confidence in you; maybe he thinks you can

bounce, like a rubber ball! Maybe!"

He carried the shares into the shop, and Fantom drove across to the general merchandise store where two women had just climbed down from a pair of buggies. They came willingly to hold the heads of the buckskins while Fantom jumped out with the tie ropes to secure them to the hitching post.

"It's the new man," said one. "It's Jim Fantom! I'm Mack Rhiner's wife," she explained. "You've heard of Mack, I guess, Mr. Fantom?"

"You bet I've heard of him. I'm mighty glad to know you, Mrs. Rhiner."

"Thanks," said she. "This here is Harriet Samuels. Maybe you have heard of Terry Samuels, too?"

"Of course he has," said Mrs. Samuels. "Sometimes I wish that I hadn't, though!"

They walked on into the store, together. "That's a fine thing to say about poor Terry!" commented Mrs. Rhiner.

"Poor Terry!" exclaimed Mrs. Samuels. "He sat up till two last night, working over a new kind of lock. He's gotta read the mind of every new-fangled lock that comes out, or else he ain't happy. You'd never think that Terry was an honest teamster, now. If it wasn't for Mr. Quay, he'd be gone like a shot. He's sure interested in his old business. The other night, I heard a scratchin' for ten minutes at the front door. It was Terry. He was tryin' to work back the bolt with just a common pin! Drat the man! How's things, Mr. Fantom?"

"Fine," said Fantom without conviction. "Everything fine."

"You'll like it up here," said Mrs. Samuels. "Won't he, Mary?"

"If he don't get sleepy and bored with it all," said Mrs. Rhiner. "Mack cuts up a little, now and then. If only there was a greaser or an Indian or something that he could work off his steam on! But there ain't!"

"Listen to her," said Mrs. Samuels. "She'd like to see her husband eatin' up Mexicans and Injuns. Ain't you ashamed of yourself, Mary?"

Mary Rhiner shrugged.

"Well, he was born with teeth," said she, "and he's gotta use 'em. He's a real artist, too. You can't expect him to settle down easy, like some other men."

"Sure he's an artist," admitted Mrs. Samuels. "I heard Terry once say that Mack could make a Colt talk English and three other languages. But it's better to have him up here where there's more trees than men."

"Oh, but ain't it!" sighed Mary Rhiner. "I bless Jonathan Quay every day of my life, I'm tellin' you!"

Fantom found himself liking both of these women. Beyond that, their faith in Quay moved him and made him feel that his feet were based upon the bedrock.

VI

SO TALKING, they wandered into the store. The clerk stepped forward.

"You know him?" whispered Mrs. Rhiner. "That's Don Pilson, the slickest second-story man you ever seen. Say, Don, meet Jim Fantom, will you?"

They shook hands. "Glad to have you here, son," said the ex-robber. "What can I do for you?"

"Half-inch copper rivets," said Fantom. "Here's Kendal's ticket."

It seemed to him that he could see the other scowl as his eye fell upon the writing of Quay's lieutenant. He stood by while Pilson looked over some shelves at the rear of the store. The clerk was still so engaged when the door slammed and Chip Lander came in.

"Here's the handsome bachelor," said Mary Rhiner. "Hullo, Chip. How's things?"

"Dizzy," said Chip.

"With what?"

"Girl," said Chip.

"What girl, where?" demanded Mrs. Rheiner.

"In the new cabin," said Chip Lander. "She's a beauty."

"I could guess that. How beautiful?"

"She wins before she starts," said Chip.

He thrust his thumbs inside his belt and teetered exultantly from heel to toe, and back again. Fantom, watching him, hungered to shout insult, and then snatch at a gun. Never had he detested anything in the world so much as he now loathed the handsome Chip Lander.

"Look at him!" chuckled Mary Rhiner. "The poor thing's in a trance!"

Mrs. Samuels laughed gaily. "When did she come in?" she asked.

"Last night, for a surprise. I found her this morning."

"Have you known her long, Chip?" asked Mrs. Samuels.

"Dreamed of her every night since I was a kid," said Chip Lander.

"Is she fond of you, Chip?"

"Yep," said Chip. "She's so doggone good-natured that she sees something even in me."

"She needs good advice," said Mrs. Rhiner.

"The poor simple thing," said Mrs. Samuels, chuckling. "Handsome, when are you gunna get married to her, and what's her name?"

"Her name is 'Beautiful,' " said Chip Lander, "and we're gunna get married as soon as I've put a lining of gold inside of that house and mounted the doors and windows with diamonds."

"That'll just take you a couple of days," said Mrs. Rhiner.

"Sure," said he. "After seein' her this mornin', I could take old Mount Baldy, yonder, and break him in two and pick out the nuggests out of his insides."

"She ain't swelled up any, Chip?"

"Her? Nope, she's just made me feel nacheral, and strong."

"Chip, where did you get it?" asked Mrs. Samuels. "I didn't know that the moonshine they peddle out in this here Happy Valley was that good!"

"Aw, he ain't particular," suggested Mrs. Rhiner delicately. "God gave him one good gift and that's a strong stomach. Don, have you got any canned salmon? We gotta eat in our house, even if they's a new sweetheart just come to town!"

"You'll eat, ma'am," said Chip Lander, "but Terry won't eat after he's seen her. They's gunna be a terrible loss of appetite among the men in this here part of the world. They's gunna be a tunin' up of banjos and fiddles, and a mighty lot of caterwaulin' around in the night. They's gunna be a lot of footmarks leadin' toward that cabin door, but they's all gunna stop at the threshold except one pair of shopmade boots. How d'you like 'em, ladies?"

He looked down admiringly at the narrowly pointed tips of his toes.

Fantom could endure no more. The gloating of young Chip Lander carried home to his very heart the remembered beauty of the girl, and now he started hastily out from the store.

"Hey!" called Chip after him. "I wanta tell *you* some things about her, Jimmy!"

"I'm busy," croaked Fantom, and passed out the front door of the store, letting it slam heavily behind him.

ON THE front veranda he waited for the mist to clear from his eye —a red-stained mist of jealous hatred. Then he breathed deeply, squared his shoulders, and was about to go down to the buckboard, when the door clanged again behind him and he heard a cheerful whistle coming out. It was Lander, he knew, and his mind darkened with the thought, as though a shadow had fallen across his soul.

A hand clapped him heartily upon the shoulder.

"How are you, old boy?" asked Chip.

Fantom whirled. "Tell a man when you're comin'!" he exclaimed bitterly. Lander stepped back in turn, amazed.

"Why, what's bitten you?" he asked.

Reason and natural gratitude to the man whose riding had saved him from the law surged up in the heart of Fantom, but instantly they were dismissed again and beaten down. Only red anger remained in him.

"Don't sneak up behind and whang a man," he said. "They's parts of the country where it ain't safe!"

Lander turned crimson.

"Are you talkin' down to me, young feller?" said he, as hot as Fantom.

"Why not talk down?" asked Jim.

"Why?" said the other. "Because they ain't enough inches in you to see over my head!"

"I see over you, and I see through you!" said Fantom. "I see through you, like thin water. And all there is at the bottom is scum!"

Lander was amazed. "Man," he exclaimed, "are you crazy? What's started you after me?"

"I been raised," said Fantom, "in a part of the country where they's only one way of talkin' about a lady."

Lander parted his lips to speak, then closed them firmly. He had seen the two women at the door of the store, and whatever explanation he might have offered, he would not be seen to take water in the presence of such witnesses.

"My way of talk is my own," said he.

"A damn poor way I call it!" answered Fantom.

"Great heavens," exclaimed Mrs. Rhiner. "They're goin' to fight!" She pushed in between them, boldly.

"Back!" snapped Fantom. The boy's lean fingers were working slowly to his gun. His eyes gleamed as they clung to the target.

"He's goin' to shoot! He's goin' to shoot! Mary, get back!" cried Harriet Samuels. And Mary Rhiner ran hastily back.

She was gone from the field of the Phantom's vision. All that remained in his eye was the form of his enemy, and a horseman coming down the street at a canter, a cloud of dust puffing up behind the heels of his horse.

"Don't so much as stir," warned Mrs. Samuels, "or it'll start 'em at each other. Chip, Chip, back out! He's got murder in him, and you won't have a chance! Chip, back out of it!

"I'll see him damned, first," said Chip, white, but coldly resolute.

"There can't be anything really wrong," said Mrs. Rhiner. "Jim Fantom, Chip never harmed any man."

"No," said Fantom, "he never harmed no man. It ain't men that he hunts down."

Said Chip, his voice coming rather hoarsely, and far away:

"I've licked you before. I'll do it ag'in, today!"

"Good!" said Fantom. "I wanted to hear you say that. Now, fill your hand, you skunk, and fill it with aces, because you're standin' around the corner from the finish of one of us!"

"Make your own move. I'll take care of myself!" said Chip Lander.

"You fool!" snarled Fantom. "I'm givin' you the last chance. Make your move and fill your hand—or I'll start this game."

A SHRILLING voice clove the air. It was Mrs. Samuels. The hand of Fantom stopped mid-leap, and he saw the form of the nearing horseman turned into that of Jonathan Quay!

"Hello, what's the matter?" Quay demanded.

"It's Jim Fantom and Lander—they're about to fight!"

"Fight? Here in the valley? Nonsense!" Quay looked calmly at the two, his keen eyes searching each face in turn. "What in the world is the matter?" he asked. "This is the man who helped you only the other day, Jim!"

"I know it," said Fantom, remorse swelling in him. "I know it. I—I turned into a mad dog. That's all!" He started hastily toward the waiting buckskins.

"One moment," said Quay, after him. "If you ladies will step on a bit—we must talk alone—" Obediently they drifted away, and Quay turned back to Jim. "Now, Fantom, what's it all about?"

"I've talked enough. I've said that I was wrong," said Fantom sullenly, without meeting the eye of the older man.

"Chip, speak up," commanded Quay.

"If Jim wants to drop it, it's dropped," said Lander, "as far as I'm concerned."

"I drop it," answered Fantom. His repentance grew strong in him. "I'll even apologize, with the women to listen to me, if you want."

Quay was waiting patiently. "I still don't know what's at the bottom of this," he said.

"I slapped him on the shoulder as I came out of the store and found him waitin' here," said Lander. "He turned around, pretty black in the face, and give me a mean word and a bad look. Seems that he didn't like the way I'd been talkin about the new girl over yonder in the new cabin. I don't know her name."

Fantom reeled. "You don't know her name?" he repeated.

"Me? Why, man, I was only blowin' off a little wind! I seen her. There ain't any harm in seein' a pretty girl—the finest I ever laid eyes on—and then talkin' a little large and foolish, is there?"

Fantom took him by the shoulders.

"D'ye mean it, Chip, d'ye mean it?" he asked.

"Mean it? Why, man, I only was there long enough to ask her for a drink of water."

Jonathan Quay looked sharply from one to the other.

"She's to be his wife, Chip," he said at last.

VII

JIM FANTOM came to the door of the cabin. It was shut, and this troubled him. Twice he raised his hand. The first time, he heard a poker rattled in the stove and let the hand fall. Again

a pan clanged loudly. But the third time he was able to rap. Rapid steps then crossed the floor, and the door was jerked open. She stood frowning above him.

"Who wants—" she began. "Oh!" she ended. "D'you leave something behind you, Mr. Fantom?"

"Matter of fact," began Jim Fantom, "matter of fact—"

He paused. He had stumbled on the word "mister" which she had prefixed to his name.

"It looks," she said severely, "as though you want to say something."

"I wanted to say," said he, "I wanted to say that—that I wanted to apologize," said he.

She looked at him with a puzzled air, as though trying to guess at some meaning hidden behind his words.

"What are you apologizing for?" she asked.

At this, a bit of color flicked into his face.

"Are you makin' a joke of me, Jo?" said he.

"Not a bit," said she. "Come in and sit down. You look all tired out."

"I don't wanta sit," said he.

"Why not?"

"Somehow I could talk better standing. What I gotta say to you is this—"

"Wait a minute," said she. "The biscuits will be burned to a crisp!"

She fled to the stove and dropped to her knees to open the oven door, while he followed her into the house.

She drew out the baking pan. A mist of steam and smoke flew up into her face, and a good savor came to him. It made him hungry. That bread had been brooded over by her, touched by her hands. His hunger grew; his heart ached most bitterly.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Fantom," she said over her shoulder, as she slid the pan of biscuits back into the oven. "You'll excuse me if I ain't got the time to listen to your apology, won't you? But I'd sure like to know what it's all about." She smiled at him and then went to the sink, where she washed some green salad. "You were goin' to say something, a minute ago," said she, at last. "Something about an apology."

Desperately he said: "I meant, for having—er—laid hands on you the way I did, and—"

"What hands?" said she. "Oh, I see what you mean. Why, that was nothing. My brother, Billy, has hugged me a lot harder than that. All you did was put a smudge on my sleeve, but you didn't break no bones. You'd oughta wash your hands before the next time you hug a girl. That's all, Mr. Fantom. Oh, heavens, the roast!"

She fled to the oven and jerking the door of it open, presently she had the lid off a roasting pan. Steam gushed out past her and the rich aroma of browning meat dwelt about the room. She studied the roast for a moment, and then basted it thoroughly.

"That's a roast," said Jim Fantom intelligently.

"You bet you guessed right," she answered, without smiling. "That ain't no chicken stew! It never crowed when it was wearin' feet and hair!" She laughed, a real peal of merriment, as she seasoned the roast.

"All right," said Fantom. "I knew that was the only way that I ever could make you laugh. *At* me, I mean, instead of with me. But I don't care if you make a fool of me, Jo."

[*Turn page*]

"The kitchen's pretty hot," she said.

"Is that a way of suggestin' that I go out into the fresh air?" he asked.

"Not a bit," she answered. "Sit down and make yourself at home."

SHE CARRIED a table cloth into the next room and he heard the clink of knives and forks as she laid them out. Through the doorway he saw that two places were arranged. Who would sit at the second one?

"Jo," he said, "will you tell me what it's all about? Why d'you have to be misterin' me so much?"

"Well," she answered, as she came toward the kitchen door, "who's little Jo Dolan to be talkin' familiar to a famous man like you, Mr. Fantom?"

"Famous?" he said, suddenly frowning. "Famous for robbin' a stage, you mean! Oh, I see. Well, I'll be goin' along. Only—" He paused. "Before I go," he burst out, "would you mind tellin' me again how you come to be here?"

"Why, Mr. Quay brought me," said she.

"And what made you want to come?"

"Well, a girl has to get married some time, Mr. Fantom. I guess you'd admit that."

"Jo," he almost shouted at her, "will you tell me who the man is? Will you name him, Jo?"

"How can I name him?" she said. "It's all in Mr. Quay's hands."

"What did he say to make you come up here?"

"He pointed out that I wouldn't be gettin' any younger from now on."

"You bein' pretty near out of your teens already, I guess," said Fantom with a fierce irony.

"I'm pretty near twenty-one," said she, "if you wanta know, young man!"

"Jo!" he cried. "Will you stop it?"

"Stop what?" she asked, taking the pan of biscuits, now marvelously browned, from the oven.

"Stop drivin' me crazy! Jo, will you for heaven's sake tell me who's gonna be here for lunch with you?"

"Why," she said, "I don't know. Have you invited anybody else?"

"Me?" said Jim Fantom. "Invited? Me invited somebody else?"

She turned past him toward the sink, saying in a matter-of-fact voice: "You better wash your hands, unless they're a lot cleaner than they were early this morning! Before you come to the table, I mean. There's some hot water in the steam kettle at the back of the stove, there. You better take the yellow soap, here. It's good for gettin' the grease off the skin."

He made an impatient gesture. But still, obediently, he took the soap, got the wash basin and poured some steaming water into it. He worked up a tremendous suds and scoured his fingers furiously.

"Jo!" he thundered at her suddenly, turning with soapy water and bubbles streaming from his wet hands.

"Yes!" she cried, starting violently.

"Jo," he announced, "the fact is that Quay sent you up here because you'd promised to marry *me!*"

He stretched out his arms. She managed to laugh.

"Look at yourself, Jim Fantom," said she. "In another minute you'll be spoilin' this dress with those wet hands of yours! Go be a man, will you now? And dry your hands, Jim, like a good boy!"

He turned on his heel and crossed the room to where a towel hung on a roller. It was glazed with newness, that towel, and the water came off slowly. But he was in no haste, now. His eyes followed her, adored her, rushed upon her, then shrank away in awe. His heart beat so thunderously, now, that he felt the pulse, like a finger, tapping at his lips.

She was busy taking out the roast, uncovering it, heating a platter with hot water, drying it, then putting the roast upon it. All about the edge she put garnishings of green things, then stood back to criticize as Fantom came upon her again.

"Jo!" said he.

She turned with a jerk, her lips parted, her breath panting. Then suddenly she drew down his face between both her hands and kissed him. But he remained half sad, for he was enlarging his strength and bracing himself against the future. He had a sense of guilt, as though he had stolen this unbelievable treasure, but he swore that he would give it good care all the days of his life.

VIII

THE SUN had marched well west before Fantom left the house and started

for the team, which he had tethered some distance away. He was half grave and half laughing, like a child. He even was partly blinded on this day of days, and stumbled and almost fell over a root that twisted up from the ground before him. Therefore, he was only aware as in a dream of a face that appeared on his right hand. It was an ugly, white face, and Fantom, bewildered, instinctively grabbed at his holster.

"Well, well," said the hunchback, "do I frighten you into pulling a gun on me?" And he smiled at Fantom.

"I missed you in the woods, stranger," said Fantom. "I'm glad that I've come up with you again here in the valley. You won't mind comin' along with me."

He approached aggressively as he said this. The hunchback shook his head.

"No," said he. "You're not the kind that does a good turn and then takes it back."

"You think," said Fantom, "that I won't bring you on to the house?"

"For Louis Kendal? No, you won't do that. You wouldn't care to stand by and see him swallow me alive."

Fantom frowned. "You're sure of yourself, and me, too," said he. "But the fact is that I was sent to get you, and you'll have to come in with me."

Again the hunchback smiled. "I don't think that I'm wrong in you. There's more manhood and honesty in you than you think Why, my boy, it would have been easy enough for me to stay behind the trees while you passed by."

Fantom paused. "It's true," he admitted. "I never would have seen you. Then why did you show yourself? Do you think, man, that I won't keep my promise to the people that I work for?"

"That's what they count on," said the hunchback. "Honor, honor, honor! They work on that. They turn it into hard cash. Your honor! They can be sure of that. They *are* sure of it. They plan on it, and scheme for it. *Your* honor and *their* crookedness makes a safe team! They'll cover a long mile with you in the harness and their crooked whips in the air above you!"

Jim stared. "You talk," said he, "as though you know everything about everyone here in the valley."

"I know the brains at the top, boy. I know the brains at the top!"

"Stranger," said Fantom, "I dunno that I'm right to stand here and let you talk."

"You will, though," answered the other with perfect calm. "Not maybe for yourself, but because of the girl in the cabin yonder. I've been watching her for some time. I watched the two of you, in fact."

"You mean that you came up to the house and looked in?"

The hunchback studied the face of the boy and nodded.

"I looked in," he said, then broke into hideous and soundless laughter. "Love!" said the hunchback. "Love! Ha, ha, ha!"

Now his laughter was aloud, and it sounded like the hoarse, raucous cawing of a crow.

"She loves him, and he loves her. They live in each other. They cannot look at one another without blushing. Oh, love, I know all about you! Food for babies and angels, not for men with broken backs and hideous faces! Not for me, but I know about it. However, you will run around the world ten times and never find another like her. You agree with that, I suppose?"

Fantom was silent, not knowing how much mockery was mixed with this praise.

"And she," said the hunchback, "will travel ten times around the world before she finds another Jim Fantom—brave, simple, full of trust, worthy of trust. Some people get to heaven by the work of the left hand. This may save even Quay and send him there—this little work of his in bringing the girl to you. Yes, she is beautiful, and she is good. I wish you joy out of the bottom of my heart."

"Thanks," said Fantom doubtfully. "*Even* Quay, did you say?"

"Even the good Quay. Yes, even Quay, I said. Beside him, Louise Kendal is an angel of grace! Do you hear me? An angel of grace!"

HE SAID it angrily, and scowled at the boy.

"I've heard enough," said Fantom firmly. "Quay's been a father to me."

"Ay, a father," said the other. "That's what he is. A father who starts his children for hell! Ah, well, my lad, keep your faith and your love, until your eyes are opened and everything

is lost! The girl, the hope, everything gone!"

"You know for yourself," said the boy, "that your life ain't worth a penny, if you're found here in the valley?"

"I know it," said the hunchback. "I know it, and I take my chance. Kendal the devil, Quay the emperor, and their myrmidons. I take my chance against them all. Courage, you see, can be locked up even in a little, twisted body like mine. Courage, and hope as well. Hope to find them, to talk to them. Only to talk."

"Without a gun?" asked the boy.

"Only a gun to keep their hands in the air and their ears open. That's all. No danger to them, my lad. Otherwise, I know that at least you'd take me out of the valley. Ay, but talk! What harm can I do them with a little conversation, spoken softly?" He waved toward the road. "Go on with your team. Keep your eyes wide and your head clear. There'll be need of thinking, before you're done with your life here."

Never had Fantom been more at a halt than he was at this moment, for he could not see where his duty lay. To take this man by force and to bring him to Louis Kendal according to order was now, he was sure, impossible. His soul revolted at the thought of taking advantage of a man who voluntarily had put himself in his hands.

"Go on," said the hunchback. "Hurry, hurry! Get through with your day's work. Come back to see her again in the evening. And ask Quay to bring the minister." He tipped back his ugly face and laughed again. "Ask Quay to bring the minister. Listen to his answer."

He began to laugh once more. But this spectacle was so horrible to the boy that he suddenly turned his back, and without a word went on to where the team was tethered.

He drove the span of buckskins with a certain pride up the driveway toward the big house of Quay, and as he came closer, saw something to the left, among the trees, that made him rein in his span and send them on at a soft walk. It was Rhiner, the ex-murderer, talking in the woods with Kendal.

The latter's head was bowed with thought. Now and then he nodded. Now and again he raised a hand as though to protest against needless violence in the speech of the other. Finally he struck one hand through the air and shook his head in flat denial.

Rhiner recoiled as one amazed and incredulous. He started forward as if to repeat his argument, but was met with a similar gesture of definite refusal. At this, there was an appearance for a moment as though the ex-criminal would snatch out a weapon; but he changed his mind, threw himself onto his horse and rode furiously away.

It sent Fantom on in gloomy thought. Here was another proof that strange things went on in the Happy Valley.

His head and glance were so downward that he did not notice the approaching Kendal until the voice of that man spoke at his back.

"I sent you out on an errand, Fantom," said he. "I didn't send you out to spend half the day!"

Fantom paid no attention.

"D'you hear me?" barked Kendal.

"You needn't bawl at me like a calf," said Fantom. "What you say don't mean anything to me, Kendal!"

"Means nothing, eh?" echoed the other.

"Nothin' at all! You can give me orders. Quay's handed you the right to do that. But as for houndin' me, they ain't a man in the world that I'd take that from, Kendal!"

He felt the other come up to him, though there was no sound.

"I've tried to give you your chance, young feller, and you wouldn't take it. I'll give you one more day to find out for yourself that the other dogs in this valley stops howling when I begin to bark! After that—"

He was gone, silently, at first; and only in the near distance did Fantom hear the trailing footfall and the jingling of the spurs begin. Instantly he was sick at heart, for he realized that he had done a useless thing, which would only imperil his happiness and the happiness of the girl he loved.

A SNARLING order from Kendal, in the distance, told him to report to the straw boss, Hendricks, for work, and he willingly did so, after the team had been put up. From Hendricks, he received orders to ride fence in the river bottom, and there all the afternoon he worked up and down the line, tightening the loosened barbed wire, replacing fallen staples, and wondering,

like all line-riders, at the slowness with which time passed.

Before sundown, he had used his last staple, and hurried back across the fields to the house of Quay. And Quay himself he found walking up and down before the stable, smoking a pipe and looking contentedly down across the darkening crimsons, blues, and greens of his valley.

Quay greeted him with the kindest of smiles.

"You're reconciled with Chip Lander and your own fate, I hope," said he.

Said Fantom: "You see how it is, Mr. Quay. I remembered your promise to bring her up here. But somehow it didn't seem that even you could do a thing like that. And the idea of losin' her was pretty hard to bear."

"I didn't bring her up," said Quay gently. "She came herself. She used her own arts of persuasion. I was merely the agent who opened the door and showed her a way to travel. You yourself brought her here, my lad. Thank yourself for it. And good luck to the pair of you!"

"Whatever luck we'll have is your giving," said the boy. "Mr. Quay, I'd ride to hell and back for you!"

Jonathan Quay lifted his big, bearded head. "I think you mean that," he said.

"I mean it. Aw, I know that it sounds loud and useless, but the time may come when something happens and you can use me!"

Quay did not answer at once, merely remaining at a stand, while he looked across his valley.

"You see that I've taken dynamite and mixed in a little more clay with it," he said at last, very gently. "But if it should ever take fire, the Happy Valley might burn with a very bright flame, Jim!" He paused. "I trust that the time never will come, but if it should, I don't know of another man in the place that I could be so sure of—not one—so much as Jim Fantom! Hello, there's the supper gong!"

The boy laughed, and instantly he was gone across the fields for the cottage in the woods. He slipped to the living-room window and, peering through, he saw the table laid for two, the fire fluttering on the hearth beyond, and a big white rug made of the skin of a mountain sheep looking, on the fire-lit floor, like a cloud in the sky.

He went back to the kitchen. She was not there!

"Jo!" he called.

She was hiding from him, no doubt, and would jump out to laugh at him. So, still smiling, he went into the front of the house.

"Jo!" he called again. But again he got no answer, and suddenly he was running from place to place, opening closets, growing cold at heart, and desperate.

He made sure. She was not in the house, so he dashed outdoors and cried furiously:

"Jo! Jo!"

He cupped his hands and cried again. Then he started to run toward the trees, but the black sight of the shadows beneath them told him that it was useless to search for her by this light. He stood for a long time, wavering, and then a light voice called him from the side of the clearing. Called his name. He ran toward her, stumbling.

"Look what I've found! Water cress!" said she.

He took her into his arms.

"I thought you were gone!" he groaned.

"You're spoiling the cress," she complained, "and the fire's dyin'. We'll have to hurry in. Why, Jim, where would I go? Silly dear!"

She slipped from him and hurried away.

Back in the house, he followed her aimlessly from place to place as she finished the preparations for supper.

"To go out at this time of night!" said he. "Out alone, into the woods when they're darkenin'. What a way to do, Jo!"

"What could hurt me? The woods are just the same night and day."

"And I don't like the idea of you stayin' here all alone," he burst out. "Especially at night."

"I've got the owls for company," she assured him.

"I'll talk to Mr. Quay. He'll probably send me off after a minister right away. First thing in the mornin'."

SHE looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. "I dunno," she said.

"You dunno what?"

"There was a man here this afternoon that looked around."

"What's that got to do with anything? He wasn't—I mean, he didn't get fresh nor nothing, Jo?"

"Him? Oh, no. He just looked around a little."

"What sort of looking man was he?"

"Oh, just a man."

"Jo, what on earth has that got to do with what we were talkin' about? Fetchin' the minister, I mean."

"He looked around a good deal," she said uneasily. "Well, I guess it was nothing."

"No, that's not what you guess."

"I shouldn't of mentioned it."

"Why not? You can mention anything to me, I guess. Now, you tell me!"

"No. It wasn't anything."

"You better tell me, Jo." He took her by the shoulders, and at that she tipped back her head and smiled suddenly.

"All right," said she. "I'll tell you, only there's nothing to tell. He was a longish sort of a man, with a longish sort of a pale face."

"Kendal!"

"I dunno his name."

"Why was *he* around?" he asked fiercely.

"He came from Mr. Quay, to see if everything was all right for me here." She stirred a pot busily.

"You got another meanin' behind that," he said. "He looked at *you* mostly."

"He looked at me once. I think that he may make trouble, Jim."

Fantom was half choked with emotion.

"You think that he'd stop Quay from bringin' the minister for us, Jo?"

"I don't know. But while I was startin' supper, tonight, all at once I was afraid to stay in the cabin. I ran out into the woods. It was gettin' dark when I came to a run of water with the cress floatin' at the edges of it, an' the sight of it ripplin' with the current gave me better nerves, somehow. So I came back. I'm sorry to tell you all of this. But it had to come out, somehow."

"It's Kendal! It's always Kendal!" he burst out. "Tell me how Kendal acted, and what he said."

"Nothing but what I've told you. He stood here at the door and wanted to know what I lacked here. That was all. Only it was his eyes and his long, ugly face; it sort of made me sick. I felt as though he could get anything that he wanted. If he wanted me, that would be an end of things! I'm sorry that I spoke about it. I shouldn't have said a word. There was no reason to say a word, I know."

He began to feel the same way about it, but when he had said good night and reached the edge of the clearing, he turned and looked back with a sudden feeling that he might never hear her voice again. Then he mastered the foolish emotion and hurried on through the woods.

Jim got to the house and had come in through the kitchen door, when there was a sudden rush of hoofs outside and Kendal burst in. He fairly flung himself into the dining room.

"He's come! I've seen him!" he said.

Jim Fantom heard the chair of Quay screech as it was shoved back.

"Be quiet!" said the master of the valley. "Come in here with me. You're dreaming a dream! He wouldn't dare!"

And they passed hastily into the adjoining room.

IX

THAT night there was a light knock at the door of the bedroom occupied by Jim and Chip. It was opened an inch from the outside. Chip was already asleep.

"Are you there, Fantom?" asked Quay.

The boy sensed his time had come.

"Yes," said he, and stepped out into the hallway.

Quay looked at him quietly for a second or two. Then he held out a small key made of brass.

"Somewhere in Kendal's room," said he, "there's a key something like this one. If you can find the key, I'm saved, and the valley's saved. If the key's not found, I'm lost, and the valley's lost. If you get it—or if not—be down in the living room in ten minutes. That's about your time-limit. At the end of that time, Kendal will probably go to his room and you won't want him to find you there."

Fantom took the key without a word. He made his way to the door of Kendal's room, at the southern end of the passage. It was locked! He turned back again up the narrow hall and tried the door at the right of Kendal's room. It too was locked, but that to the left gave under his hand. He entered an unoccu-

pied chamber and crossed to the window. He pushed the window open and leaned out.

From the watering trough, someone was leading two horses back to the barn. There was no other thing in sight.

The window of Kendal's room was not far to his right, and it was possible to get to it by working along a narrow ledge. He slipped out at once, based his toes upon the ledge, and took a finger hold upon the rough surfaces of the logs. In this manner he came to the window of Kendal and looked about and beneath him. A man cursed in the barn, but nothing was in sight. So he tried the window. It was locked, like the door!

However, window locks are rarely strong. He heaved with all his might and, at the second pressure, the lock broke loose. Inside, he drew the heavy shutters across the window, lighted a match, and from the match ignited a small lamp that stood on the table at the head of bed.

Something fluttered shoulder high, beside him. He turned and saw a golden canary spreading its wings with a whir as it darted from side to side of its cage. Then it dropped to a corner and lay there with wings outspread, as though exhausted.

With shortened breath he stared around the room. Everywhere the walls were covered with weapons of all sorts. At one end was a fan-shaped cluster of spears, all from Africa, and every one of a different pattern. There were knives and swords around the rest of the wall, creeses, Ghurka knives, stilettos that looked hardly more than needles, great head-swords from the East Indies, ceremonial weapons from Indian and Burma, stiff-bladed poniards, Aztec daggers as broad as a man's hand and no longer.

He searched the entire armory with keen interest, and though he could not find the key attached to the point or the handle of any of these, yet he felt that he had learned an appreciable something about the great Louis Kendal. The man exulted above all things in the dealing of pain, so that all these grotesque and beautiful manners of giving death were delightful to him.

He scanned the walls next, looking for some crevice into which the key could be thrust. He examined the floor in the same way, then turned to a wardrobe in a corner. He went through the clothes inside, but the key was not there. A bit of matting lay before the washstand, and this he lifted as a last resource, but the floor was naked underneath.

There was nothing more to do, and with a sigh he swung about and started for the lamp. He came up so hastily that the little canary went into a greater frenzy than before, dashing from side to side of the cage, the wires of which chimed softly as it struck against them, then with a loudly clashing note.

The thought struck Fantom mid-step and raised him to his toes.

IN ANOTHER instant he had the door of the cage open and the bird in his hand. His thumb struck what he wanted. Fitted close beneath the wing of the bird, harnessed to it with a thread delicately worked under the neck and body feathers, was a key! In a moment he removed it. Then he restored the canary to its cage, puffed out the lamp, parted the shutters and looked out.

Two men were sauntering from the barn toward the house. He dared not go out while they were there, but had to hang in agony at the window watching them. Finally they disappeared into the kitchen door. He was out the window at once.

When he reached the dining room, two men whom he had not yet seen in the valley were there. They nodded carelessly at him and he waved to them. A moment later, out of the next door came Kendal himself, with Quay beside him. Controlled fury was in the face of the tall man and something like fear. Strain showed in the eyes of Quay, as well.

His glance found and clung to the face of young Jim Fantom, and the latter nodded almost imperceptibly. Quay put a hand on the shoulder of Kendal.

"You'll have everything that you wish," said he, "but we'll wait till tomorrow morning."

"Everything?" demanded Kendal sharply.

"Everything," reiterated Quay.

Kendal studied him, as if expecting a further explanation.

"It's more'n I expected!" he broke

out suddenly. Then he added, "I'm gunna go out and walk some of the cobwebs out of my brain. Come along, the two of you!"

The pair trooped out after him. Quay swung to Fantom with outstretched hand. Into the palm of it Fantom dropped the key.

"Thank heaven for the day when I found you!" said Quay. "Thank heaven for the fool who came to kill you in Burned Hill and showed me your real self! My lad, now everything is easy, I think, although your night's work is only beginning. Follow me!"

He took a small pocket lantern and with it lighted the winding steps which descended to a capacious cellar beneath the house. They passed through a wood store, another room filled with great heaps of beets, onions, potatoes, turnips, and long-rooted carrots. So they came to an end door, the last of the cellar, as it seemed, and before this Quay paused. With one key he opened the top lock, and with another the lower.

The door slowly opened. It was as heavy as lead, and Fantom could see the reason for its weight in the shape of a half-inch slab of steel that reinforced the door on the inside. They passed through and stood before the one article of furniture which the room contained. This was a tall, narrow safe, propped against the wall, and as it appeared, the old man looked sidewise at the boy, then nodded.

"You are about to see a treasure," said he. "For the sake of it, you may be tempted to murder me, lad, but I know your heart. You'll resist that temptation and fulfill my will, still. The year has hardly begun during which you're my man!"

Like the door, the safe carried a double lock, and for the first he took from a vest pocket the key he had shown to Fantom; for the second he used the one that Fantom had just secured from the room of Kendal. At last the boy understood. For the opening and the closing of this safe, each man had one key, and it could not be touched by one without the other's consent, unless both keys were lodged in one hand.

The door swayed open. Inside, appeared a neat array of packages. One of these Quay unwrapped, and showed to the astonished eyes of Fantom four high stacks of greenbacks, closely wedged together. Another contained a bag of chamois, the neck of which he opened wide, and Fantom looked down into a weltering mass of light. Diamonds! Handfuls of them, stained here and there with the green of emeralds and the red spots of rubies, like points of angry fire.

It was a vision of wealth undreamed of by the boy. But there were other packages which Quay was taking and, without a glance, dropping them into the wide mouth of a saddle-bag. When he had finished, he faced Fantom.

"Now, quick, quick!" said he.

HE LED the way out of the room, closed and locked the doors behind him and dropped into the boy's pocket all the four keys. Back to the dining room he went.

"Here!" said he, taking a quantity of cord from his pockets and a folded handkerchief. "Tie and gag me, then go to the stable. Get the best horse you can find and ride as if the devil were after you, as he's sure to be, before long. Take the road back toward Burned Hill. Outside the town you'll find a small shack by the creek, with no one living there, a little cabin surrounded by poplars. Wait and watch there, or near there. I shall come within three days. Or, after that, you can take the money and it is yours!"

Sweat streamed down the face of Jim Fantom. Now he saw the staring truth about Quay. That greatness of heart which had made him gather in criminals to this valley had, in reality, been simply a mask under which he collected masters of crime who were used in all of their old talents under the keen direction of the partner, Kendal. This was the loot which they had gathered from a hundred robberies!

"And the girl?" he asked hoarsely.

"The girl? The girl? What difference—ah, yes, the girl. Believe me, my lad, that the Happy Valley will be a naked valley as soon as this thing is known. Kendal will be gone on wings to follow you, and the others will stream after him. There will be left only the girl. Come back here to her, then. If I find you in the little shack—are you sure that you know the place?"

"Yes, I know it well. It was where McDonald Petrie lived."

"If I meet you there, I'll give you a deed of gift to the valley. Quick! The devil will be back!"

Fantom's hands worked fast, but his mind was working even faster. He remembered the conversation between Kendal and Rhiner. No doubt that Rhiner was asking for his percentage of some recent robbery and Kendal was putting him off. He thought of the hunchback, too. He had encountered Kendal and made some demand of him which Kendal was helpless to resist. It was that demand which he had transferred on to Quay, and which Quay had resisted until he made sure that the entire treasure would pass into his own hands through the agency of Fantom himself!

Quay had played his game, had saved Fantom's life from the posse's pursuit, had exerted himself to bring up to the valley the girl for whom the boy had formed his passion, and so had gathered him utterly and helplessly into the palm of his hand. It had all been part of his fantastic scheme for plundering his associates.

He said through stiffened lips, as his hands drew the cords tight:

"I'll do all this, but you on your side have to see her and tell her that no matter what I've done, I love her. That nothing but death will keep me back from her. Do you hear?"

"I hear you. I'll tell her, even though it's one way in which Kendal's suspicion can be fixed on me. His and all the rest. But when he closes his hands and expects to find me under their fingers, they'll be closing on thin air, thin air!"

He chuckled softly as he said it, and with an almost savage satisfaction, Fantom thrust the balled-up handkerchief between his teeth for a gag. Then, taking the saddle-bag filled with the treasure, he left the house, only pausing for his rifle and someone's slicker, which he draped over the bag.

Straight before him, by the watering trough, he saw the tall form of Kendal, walking up and down with his two liegemen trailing after him.

"You, Fantom! Where are you going?"

"Shootin' owls. What else?"

He pursued his way to the barn in shuddering anticipation that the long, swift stride of Kendal would soon overtake him. He stumbled forward to find the right horse. Much depended upon that! Then a lean, gray head raised above the line of the stalls and he saw himself looking into a keen, small eye of fire.

When he stepped behind the horse, he found it was a tall, gray mare which belonged to the great Louis Kendal himself, a peerless animal, it was said in the valley, with the speed of the wind.

INSTANTLY he had flounced the saddle upon her back. The next matter of importance was how he could get her from the barn. There was a back door, but it led into a nest of corrals, and it would take much time to open the gates or lower the bars of these in order to get out.

Yet there was no better way. He could not very well go through the front door of the barn in the face of Kendal—on Kendal's own horse. So he backed the mare from her stall and started down the long aisle toward the rear door of the barn.

As he went, a horse neighed, and the mare tossed her head and whinnied in answer. But he reached the rear door of the barn and thrust it open as the voice of Kendal clanged from the front of the building:

"Hello! Hello!"

He drew the mare through the doorway with nervous hands.

"Hello, you—Fantom! What in hell are you doin' with Mischief?"

"I'm takin' her out for a jog," he answered. "No harm in that, is there?"

"What'n hell you mean by touchin' my hoss, you fool?"

"Why, she sure needs a mite of exercise, Kendal," answered the boy in conciliating tones.

"Bring her back! Bring her back, right pronto! I'm gunna give you a lesson in borrowin' the first hoss that you come to! Exercise? I'll exercise her, you blockhead! Take out Mischief, would you?"

He came stalking rapidly down the aisle of the barn, and panic turned the brain of Fantom dark. With a thrust of his left hand he slammed the door. Mischief, alarmed, wheeled and reared, but he followed the heave of the movement and leaped onto her back, and found the stirrups.

For one instant, he looked down upon

the fences from the height of her rearing, while he heard the ugly voice of Kendal shouting:

"Bill—Jerry! Come on the run! They's some hellfire started! Scatter for the corral!"

And Fantom saw clearly what was before him. It was either jumping the fences or remaining behind to be slaughtered by the three experts. He dared not let them catch him while the saddle-bag was in his possession. So he turned the mare's head toward that point where the range of the barriers seemed the thinnest, and urged her toward it at a full gallop.

Behind him, the door of the barn opened and the pale shaft of lantern light spilled toward him as he put the mare at the jump.

"Are you gone crazy?" yelled Kendal.

Straight at the fence sped the tall mare, gathering speed and length in her stride, but at the last moment she refused, twisting about with a catlike agility, in spite of her size, and racing back along the fence.

"I'll shoot you down, you idiot! Stop her, or you get it now!"

He could only wonder that Kendal had held his hand for so long. In the meantime, he had twitched back into the saddle, found both stirrups and straightened the mare for the fence that rose ahead. It pitched up high. A five-foot jump, it looked to him.

As they neared this time, he felt the mare's quarters sink and gather with a quivering tautness, and he knew that the mystery was at least in some part mastered by her. Up she rose, as a bird rises, at the same moment that the gun barked from Kendal's hand.

The bullet flew very wide. Not even the hum of it was in the ears of the fugitive, but the yell of Kendal and the sound of the shot had raised a nearer enemy. One of the two who had been with the tall man had run about the rear of the barn, and now Fantom saw a shadow step past the edge of the barn and saw the glitter of a leveled gun.

Already he had switched the reins into his left hand, though another fence rose straight before him. Now, as the good mare pitched up at it with a grunt of effort, he slipped a Colt into his hand and fired at the menacing shadow.

There was an answering flash and roar from the ready gun of the other; but, as the mare soared and swung down clear on the other side of the barrier, from the tail of his eye Fantom saw the last gunman walk forward with outstretched hands, a pace or two, and then fall upon his face.

Another fence sprang toward them through the darkness, as it seemed to Fantom. She jumped it, in stride, as a bullet from behind knocked the hat from his head. It sailed forward; he caught it in mid-air, and sent Mischief gallantly on at the last barrier of all. That, also, she cleared with ease, and before him lay the open country.

X

DAWN found him far away among the mountains. From the time when he hurdled the corral fences, he had had no sight and no sound of a pursuit. The good gray mare had seen to that. She had flown over the level, trotted doggedly up the steeps, eased herself without a jar down the hard slopes.

He let her graze, now, for a little time, not standing still but walking with the girths of the saddle loosened. So they ambled on until suddenly, like sounds in a dream, Fantom was aware of thunder in the rear. In an instant he had jerked the girths tight and was in the saddle. He had barely brought her to a gallop when looking back, he saw three men, flogging their mustangs, spill out around a hill-shoulder. Then, behind them, half a dozen others.

Mischief stretched away in her longest stride, at once. They were out of sight now, and when they came in view again, four men, instead of three, were riding together in the lead, one of them Louis Kendal!

The heart of Fantom sank, for though the mare was still holding them, it seemed to him that already she was laboring in her gallop. Then before him he saw a steep rise of ground with no way around it, for the hills closed down on either side. But by the time they reached the top, Fantom knew she was ended. They who followed knew, also. Their yells came on his ears like the yelling of madmen.

Deep he sank the spurs. Mischief, with a stagger, came into a laboring gallop, but her stride floundered. She was managing no more than a trot when the crest of the pursuing wave broke

over the top of the slope behind. Fantom turned in the saddle, unhousing his rifle as he did so. At that, they spread out to either side, actually reining in their horses! Still more astonishing, the whole flight now wheeled about and fled, as though each man expected a bullet through his back.

A new sound burst on the ear of Jim Fantom. Glancing ahead, he saw a dozen riders appear as by magic from behind the foot of some hills. Sheriff Bud Cross rode in the center; behind him, or to either side came others, grim-faced, tight-lipped. They rushed about him. A man was at his horse's head, others on either side, with the hard noses of Colts nudging his ribs.

"Hands up, Fantom!"

Resistance was ridiculous. He raised his arms slowly, and watched the sheriff with the rest of his men flying after the corps of Louis Kendal. He shook his head.

"You're right," said a familiar voice beside him. "They ain't gunna get the rest of the crooks; but we got you, Fantom." He looked into the eyes of Tom Dollar, that old associate, and saw that Tom was laughing with a savage delight. "Now lemme see you make your fast play, Fantom. Get yourself good and famous. What's the use of waitin' for the jury to hang you? Here's Judge Colt that'll give you a final opinion!"

"Let him be, Dollar," said one of the others. "Here they come back already. That gang had fresh hosses, it looks like. They run you down pretty slick, Fantom, didn't they?"

Dollar nodded. "Yeah, it's better this way. We can watch the crook when he comes up for murder. We can watch him hang, too! He'll look pretty on the end of a rope!" He cackled with his pleasure. "I'll take his guns. You fan him for a knife, Steve."

Steve obeyed. They had stripped Fantom of weapons when the sheriff returned. One of the posse, riding on ahead, broke into a shrill laughter at the sight of Fantom, whose hands now were manacled. The laughter came from Sam Kruger.

"Well," crowed little Sam, "we're mighty glad to see you, Jim! Shake on it. He won't shake. He don't see me, maybe. I'm too damn small. But I see you, Fantom. I'll see you hang, damn you!"

HERE Sheriff Bud Cross rode up. "What's Fantom ever done to you, Kruger?" he asked in disgust. "Get out of my sight, and keep out! If his hands wasn't in irons, you'd all run up trees at the sight of him, and you know it!"

Then, as a score of led horses now came down the valley with four men in charge, the sheriff gave quick directions.

"Some of you get to those hosses and change saddles. We're gunna go on after that gang of crooks. Hurry up, now, and take care that black devil don't put his heels through the head of one of you."

The others went obediently. Bud Cross turned back to his prisoner.

"Jim," said he, "why didn't you barge along north and get out of the country?"

"I got two reasons," answered the captive, "an' the first one is enough. I didn't kill Larry Phelan!"

The eye of the sheriff was thoughtful. "The mind of the county don't figger that way, and I'm the county servant."

"Yes," answered Fantom, "I know. I don't hold no grudge ag'in you, Bud. Only—to be run down by a crowd like that!"

"It takes all kinds of dogs to make a pack," philosophized the sheriff, "but I gotta say that I didn't pick that mean little snake, Sam Kruger. What's he got ag'in you, son? He furnished three fine hosses for this show. All for the sake of runnin' you down. An' how was I to know that one of his hosses—that black streak of deviltry over yonder—would cause so much trouble? I couldn't shut out a man from the party that put up as much good hoss flesh as that."

"Kruger did all of that?" repeated the prisoner. "I dunno why it is, Bud. The fact is that I never stepped on his toes, that I know of."

"You mean what you say about Phelan?" broke in the sheriff.

Fantom smiled faintly. "What for would I shoot a dog, Bud?"

"A dog?"

"Why, Larry Phelan showed yaller a mile wide at the saloon, that same day. Why should I foller him up and murder him, I ask you? There in the saloon was my chance, if I'd wanted to take it."

"I never thought of that," admitted the sheriff. "You ain't a dead man yet,

old son," said he. "An' when I get back from this job, wherever it leads me, I'll try to see that you get justice. Keep your head up, an' keep on hopin'. So long, Fantom. I'll be seein' you inside of the week."

He was off his horse as he spoke, and soon throwing the saddle on the back of another which was led up to him. Then he mustered his forces.

"Here, you," said he. "We're ridin'. I can't take everybody. They's gotta be a guard left here with Jim Fantom. Dollar and Kruger, you stay here behind with him. D'you hear? Take care of him. I don't want no roughness. The rest of you, come with me and ride like hell! Maybe we'll get famous before this day turns dark!"

Dust blew up behind the galloping horses, and when it had settled again the riders had disappeared, leaving only the horse wranglers and Fantom with his two guards.

"Look here," said Jim. "Tell me why you got it in for me, Kruger. Not that it matters, but I'm sort of curious."

"No. It don't matter, anything that I think," said Kruger bitterly. "What am I but a runt? I ain't any Larry Phelan, the girls always would be sayin' behind my back. I ain't famous like Jim Fantom. I got no good qualities, but I can keep my neck out of a noose and bullets outside of my skin, it seems. That's something. That's qualities enough for me!"

Fantom watched him with the interest he would have shown toward a strange beast or a queer insect.

"It's all right, man," said he. "I understand. It's all right. Go ahead and show your teeth."

"Damn you!" said Kruger.

"The main thing, Sammy," broke in Tom Dollar, "is that we gotta pay a lot of attention an' take a lot of care of this here fellow, ain't it?"

"That's what the sheriff said," answered Kruger.

"Well, then, the first thing is what hoss are we gunna put him on to ride him back to Burned Hill?"

"I dunno. Anything," said Kruger.

"Now what kind of talk is that?" demanded Dollar in mock horror. "As though we'd bring back a man like Fantom into his home town on any kind of a lookin' nag! What would the girls think of him, if they seen the hero come back not fixed up right on a fine hoss?"

"Sure," snarled Kruger. "What would they think?"

"We gotta give him the finest hoss that we got in the herd, don't we?"

"Yeah?" drawled Kruger, not following the drift of his companion.

"And is they a finer-lookin' hoss in the outfit than that black?"

"You mean that jumpin' thunderbolt?"

"Why, I'm thinkin' of the impression that he'll make with our friend here on his back, goin' into Burned Hill."

"Goin' *through* Burned Hill, you mean. He'd go through it in two winks! What you mean, Tom Dollar?"

"I'm only thinkin' about the honor that we'll be doing to the most prominent citizen of Burned Hill. I'm thinkin' of the fine procession hoss that Darkness, yonder, would make. He belongs to you. Would you loan him, Sammy?"

Suddenly Sam Kruger laughed. "I foller your drift now, old son! Sure I do! Hey, you! Bring in Darkness, will you?"

THEY brought in Darkness, and Fantom, without complaint, looked over the most magnificent creature he ever had laid eyes upon. From his shoulders to his quarters, from his short, strong back to the whipcord drawn in his flanks, from hocks to knees and the hammered iron of his lower legs, Jim thought him fleckless and flawless.

But he was wrong, it seemed, and as one of the other horses came near, Darkness lashed out with both heels, then reared and struck at the man who was dragging on his reins.

"Who'll ride him?" said the wrangler. "You, Tom? Or you, Kruger?"

He looked with contempt at the little man, but Kruger answered: "We got a champeen with us. He'll take a turn out of old Darkness."

"You gunna take the chance to set him loose on that hoss?" asked the wrangler.

"Hell, no! We'll have our ropes on him, won't we? We'll just set pretty and watch Jim Fantom ride. In case he should get a fall, we'll shackle his feet under the belly of his hoss. Why not?"

The horse wrangler shook his head. "Looks like dirty work to me, if you want my opinion."

"I *don't* want it," said Tom Dollar

sharply. "Hosses is your business, not men!"

They had to blindfold the black stallion, and when he felt the weight of Fanton heaved up on his back, he crouched beneath it almost until his belly touched the ground. When he rose again, it was only halfway erect, his muscles quivering with readiness to leap away. In the meantime, a rope was passed beneath the girths, binding the feet of Fantom fast.

"There you are!" said Kruger, standing back with a sneer of malice. "It sure shows that we think a lot of your personal safety, Fantom, tyin' you into the saddle so's you can't possibly be thrown!"

But their real meaning was obvious enough. Such a devil as Darkness was reasonably sure to throw himself and roll to get the burden off his back. And if that happened, it was a horrible and quick death for the fastened rider.

"He's *been* rode, once. Two years back," Kruger laughed. "Let him go, Tom!"

They were on their horses, each with a rope around the neck of the black, and now Dollar leaned and twitched the bandage from the head of Darkness. The answer was sudden and unexpected, for Darkness, like an uncaged panther, sprang at Dollar's horse and tried to take him by the throat.

The mustang whirled and fled for dear life, while Kruger was unable to get his own pony into position before the rope that was fastened around the horn of his saddle with a single hitch, came taut. And with the violence of the shock, horse and man toppled to the ground and rolled over and over.

Tom Dollar drew his gun and fired, but the back of a dodging, swerving horse is no safe shooting platform, and the bullet missed its goal. After that, it was like chasing a comet. The black horse went away with winged bounds. None of his viciousness was expressed in bucking on this day; it was as though he were striving to blow the weight from his back by the sheer speed of his gallop.

Yet danger enough remained in the saddle with Jim Fantom. Above all, dangling ropes might at any moment tangle the powerful legs of the stallion. For that thing, no doubt, Tom Dollar and Kruger would be praying.

However, Fantom was not quite helpless. He could reach out with his manacled hands, and taking the nooses, one by one, enlarge them and cast them over the head of the horse. So that first danger was removed, only to be replaced by a second, for the shadow of a wood appeared in the valley before them, and into it the stallion rushed at full speed.

His purpose was instantly clear. He swerved right and left beneath the lower branches, or shaved close to trunks, hoping to crush the legs of the rider.

The stallion reached a thicket of high brush. Through it he dashed with outstretched head; but for the rider it was a scourging of a thousand whipstrokes, and finally a blow that seemed to crush in his forehead.

HOW LONG he hung swaying, he could not tell, but at least he knew that the sun was high, when he recovered, and beating on the back of his head. The black stallion was grazing in a lovely meadow, ringed around with the woods, a meadow streaked and dotted with flowers.

When his rider straightened at last in the saddle, the big horse lifted his head, also, and looked back with an eye from which the red stain had disappeared. He pricked his ears with friendly curiosity, and then sniffed and stamped.

Fantom's brain cleared rapidly. Hope was in the wind. Slipping his hands far down, he gathered in one rein, then the other, and knotted the ends. At that, he felt that two-thirds of the battle had been gained, for the horse was now in his hands, gentled, obedient to his will. It stepped freely out, with an easy, daisy-clipping stride, moving its head a little from side to side as though it were enjoying this day's journey and all the fresh beauty of the open country around it.

The meadow narrowed at the farther end, then suddenly expanded into farming fields. Small houses stood in the distance, their chimneys smoking.

"Hello!" said a voice, and Fenton turned and saw a ragged boy, barefooted, an old shotgun over the crook of his arm. "Jiminy!" said the boy. "You been through it, all right!"

"I been through it," admitted Fantom.

"Jiminy!" repeated the boy. "Feet tied —and—and handcuffs! Who are you?"

The muzzle of the gun slowly swung around until it covered Fantom.

"I'm a fool," he said bitterly.

"Yeah?" asked the boy.

"I'm a fool," said Fantom. "I did this on a bet. Just cut this rope that's holdin' my feet, will you?"

"You did it on a bet, eh?" asked the boy, unconvinced. "Maybe you better come along and tell pop about that bet and who you are."

"I'm Hugh Chatterton," said Fantom. "I'm from up the Black Mountains way." He wondered, as he spoke, how far away the Black Mountains might be.

"When d'you leave 'em?" asked the boy.

"This morning, early."

"I bet it was early," the boy agreed. "You must of left on the wind, too, because no hoss in the world would blow you here this fast!" Suddenly the eye of the boy lighted. "That's Darkness. That's the fightin' hoss!" said he. "I seen him at the rodeo last fall. He sure punched holes in the sky! He dropped the gents that tried him all over the field! He sure is a wicked one!"

"He is," agreed Fantom.

"And—" the boy paused. "You rode him out!" said he. "He looks plumb gentled, now."

"He's easy goin', now. He worked himself out."

"Who are you?" asked the boy again. "What's your real name, Mr. Chatterton? Not Jim Fantom, by any chance?" To Fantom, it was like the tolling of a doom bell. "You're right. I'm Fantom."

"Who put you on that hoss?"

"The sheriff's men. Kruger and Tom Dollar."

"Them two caught you?"

"I ran into the whole posse."

"And the sheriff left you with them, and they stuck you up like that—and then you got away?"

"Yes. Now take me on in. They'll have a tidy reward for my capture by this time, I guess. You could use it, maybe?"

"Jiminy! Could we?" murmured the boy. "Twenty-five hundred dollars!"

He looked again at the helpless man before him. "Dollar and Kruger," he repeated, as though the names stuck in his throat. "Them two! They wanted to see you busted up more than a—than—"

"Than a hangman's rope. Yep. That's what they wanted."

"Phelan—what made you go and snipe at him?" asked the boy. "I mean, after you'd showed him up at the saloon, that way?"

"Son," said Fantom slowly, "after what happened in the saloon, what use was there in shootin' a dog?"

"Hey?" said the boy, startled.

"Some other man might have stepped in, old-timer. He'd know that the blame would come my way."

"Never thought of that," gasped the youngster. "Why, then they'd hang you for nothin'!" He drew out a clasp knife, unfolded the blade, and stepped closer.

"Well," he said, "*I* believe you, though I guess older folks wouldn't."

THE KNIFE slashed the rope and the feet of the rider were free. The boy stepped back with a sigh.

"There's still the hands," he said.

"You've done enough," said the other. "I want your name."

"Me? I'm Bud Loring."

"But, I wanta shake hands with you."

"Sure," said Bud, with a flashing grin.

They shook hands.

"Jiminy," said Bud, "to think of the guns that hand has grabbed out of leather! Well, you come back with me and I'll snake a file out of the blacksmith shop behind the house."

He led the way. Fantom drifted through the trees near by, sufficiently deep to be sheltered from observation, and so they came up behind a little dilapidated house. The boy disappeared into a shed and presently came back with a pair of files.

"These are the best kind for steel," said he. "Dad's a good blacksmith and he keeps the right kind of tools."

The right kind indeed they proved to be, biting into the hard metal of the manacles as though with a diamond edge. Still, the work took time, and the files had to be turned repeatedly to fresh edges as the teeth grew duller and the steel of the wrist bands grew hot. The first one, at last, was cut through in two places and the right hand of Fantom was free again. The boy fell to work on the other, panting and sweating.

"Bud-die!" screamed a woman's voice from the house.

"Jiminy!" said Bud. "It's lunch time, and ma'll give me a bad time of it, I guess!" The boy worked furiously. One

segment of the circle was penetrated. He commenced a second sawing.

"Bud!" yelped the summary voice.

"Com-ing!"

The file squeaked and scraped. It had lost its first sharpness, but still it sawed down into the steel slowly, steadily.

"I'll never forget you, son," Jim Fantom said. "Is there anything that you could ask out of me, Bud?"

"Me? Well, of course there ain't anything that I'd dare to ask. But one of Jim Fantom's guns—"

"I haven't a weapon," said Fantom. "They fanned me and got everything."

"Hold on! You got bare hands, then?"

"I've a horse that's better than a gun. It'll keep me away from trouble so's I won't have to fight."

"Ay. He's a jim-dandy, all right. But you without a gun—that'll go kind of hard, maybe?"

"Well, maybe it will. But we gotta learn how to dodge the bad corners, Bud, when a man lives like me, with a fist over his head all of the time."

"I bet you do. You'll be goin' away, I guess? You'll try Mexico, I reckon?"

Jim Fantom shook his head. "I can't run away."

"What keeps you?"

"Something a pile stronger than ropes and handcuffs, old-timer."

Then he fell silent. The heat from the friction of the file burned the skin of his wrist. Then the teeth actually touched the flesh and the handcuff broke off with a faintly ringing snap.

"Bud Loring. I'm gunna skin you!" cried the voice of the mother from the cottage.

"She will, too," panted Bud.

"Wait one minute," said Fantom, flexing his hands. "I want to leave something with you to remember me by!"

He stepped to the loaded saddle-bag and opened the mouth of it, wondering as he did so that when the saddle was changed from the gray mare, Mischief, to the back of Darkness, no one had thought to examine the baggage of the captive. But after all, there had been a swirl of haste and of commotion.

Into the bag he dipped, found and drew out a small handful of jewels. He counted out ten jewels of some price. If he guessed correctly, the least of them was worth five hundred dollars. He dropped them into the boy's palm.

"Mind you," said the man, with a forefinger raised, "you were rootin' around in a junk heap, and this is what you found. Remember that! It's more than the twenty-five hundred that your father would have got as blood money for me. Maybe it'll buy him some more land and a better cabin. So long, Bud!"

XI

WHEN FANTOM reached the Mcdonald Petrie cabin, he found Quay already sitting on the doorstep. To one side were a pair of slender-bodied thoroughbreds. That explained how Quay had come down from the valley so swiftly.

"And here you are, my boy," said Quay, without raising his voice.

Fantom approached his master. Without a word, he placed the saddle-bags beside Jonathan Quay. The latter looked earnestly up into the face of the other, then silently opened the bag. From it he took what looked like a pile of pale fire and held it out.

"It will be only a taste, my boy," said Quay.

Fantom shook his head. "A few days back," said he, "I'd of taken it and mighty glad to get it. But I can't take it now. There's Jo up yonder in the vallay. What would she think?"

"Women," said Quay, "never hate evil that is doing them good. Particularly mothers, my son. Everything that helps to put clothes on the back of the child, to fill his pocket, is good for a mother. Believe me!"

"It ain't what I want," said Fantom.

"What do you want, my lad?"

"I wanta live," said the boy, "not by a gun but by my hands. I wanta have the feel of an ax in my hands, and drop trees with it. I wanta see the ground turn up behind the plow whose handles I'm holdin', I wanta plant and grow and harvest."

"Well, the call of the soil is a good call," said Quay. "Sit down, Jim. I'll give you a deed to the Happy Valley that ought to be legally binding."

He took out a notebook and began to write rapidly. "Here you are," said Jonathan Quay at last. "You'll find the valley an empty thing. They'll sweep out of it. Perhaps all except young Chip Lander. He's an honest boy in the making, I take it. If you have the strength

and the ambition, try to keep the storehouses in repair, unless the devils have burned everything in their rage and their hatred of me."

"Of you?" said the boy. "It's me they'll blame for everything!"

"Not when I disappear. They'll understand, then, that I was the man who planned it. Kendal will understand and let the others know. My friend Louis Kendal. And now good-by, Jimmy. I've never met a better man. You may tell your wife that."

So Jim Fantom left him, took his horse at the edge of the clearing and rode away. He had been riding for some minutes, when he heard the noise of a horse behind him.

"Fantom!" the rider called.

"Do you know?" Fantom asked.

"Will you come back with me to the cabin?" he said. "I want you to go back there and use your eyes. Then you're a free man, unless you care to talk to me about what you see."

"I've turned my back on that place," said Fantom uneasily. "I ain't goin'back again."

"All right," said the hunchback. "You're the one man, I think, who could do something about it. But I can't force you."

"I'll go," agreed Fantom suddenly, but his blood was ice, and why, he could not tell. It was as though the little man breathed out an atmosphere of dread.

BACK at the cabin, Fantom's first sight was of Quay sitting at the doorway, apparently as before. Fantom turned to the hunchback, who gestured for him to make a closer investigation. Then Fantom saw the handle of a knife sticking out from Quay's breast above the heart! And the saddle-bag was gone!

"Do you know?" Fantom asked the hunchback.

"I saw," was the reply. "I saw Quay sitting there. I saw you leave. I was wondering how I could get for myself from that saddle-bag what is due me, when my friend, Louis Kendal, appeared slipping down the side of the house. I saw the knife go home into Quay's body. I saw Kendal pick up the saddle-bag and slip away into the woods he had come from. Then I went after you. I'd seen you say good-by to him. Of course, Kendal had, too. He'd been waiting there."

"What drew him down?"

"I don't know how he knew. All I know is that I followed him like mad across the mountains after the sheriff came whirling up through the valley—"

"And what did Cross do?"

"Nothing. The word had gone around. There was an exodus in progress. Every team in the valley was harnessed to buckboards and wagons. Mules and horses, the little mustangs, and draft animals for the plough, they were all used. Whole families worked like mad. They went to the store and gutted everything that was worth carrying away.

"Suddenly Rhiner, or some other, gives the word. Half a dozen men kindled fires, and they begin to leap and roar in the dark of the night. This happened all in the night, d'you see? After you had left, after the word had been passed around that Quay and Kendal also were gone. The whole village goes shooting up in flames!"

"They burned the whole village? Every cabin?"

"Until they came to your place in the woods, where Chip Lander stopped 'em with a rifle and shot over their heads."

"Lander!" exclaimed Jim Fantom. "Chip Lander!"

The hunchback nodded. "Yes, Lander. It was dawn, then. He was still carrying into the house some of the load of loot that he'd taken from the stores —his share of the plunder."

"He'd taken the loot to *her* house?"

"Yes."

Sweat burst out on the forehead of Fantom. "He had no house of his own. So he turned his share over to her!"

"Exactly! He was carrying things into the house when they came in a swarm, yelling like devils. He shot over their heads. When they saw he was in earnest, they spilled back from the place. I saw that the cottage would be safe, and then I started out of the valley. I had a good horse, and another on the lead. I looked back and saw the whole valley thick with smoke, because there wasn't much wind and the smoke rolled up into a big, white tableland. Now and then through a rift there would be a sight of black ruins and a welter of flames on them.

"Then down the south trail belched a rattle of horses. They were coming back, the riders from the Happy Valley, but without Kendal. Kendal was gone,

they shouted to me, and went on in a whirl. Not far behind came the posse of the sheriff.

"They dipped down into the smoke, and that was the last of 'em. But what will they find? All clues and traces are blotted out. The valley's wiped from the face of the map, and only over in a corner there is the place of Jim Fantom, with a woman keeping it, and Chip Lander's rifle as well. A brave lad, is Chip!"

Fantom was silent. Then he murmured through stiffened lips:

"I have to start on. One minute, though. How did you pick up the trail of Kendal?"

"I spotted him with my glass when he was miles off. I pulled up on him and shadowed him through the hills. And so we came here. That's all. Where are you going, young man?"

"Back to the Happy Valley."

"Then hurry, or Kendal will be there before you."

"Kendal? There again? What's there for him to find at the place?"

"A beautiful woman waiting."

FANTOM shook his head. "Lander's the man I fear. He's handsome. He's been the hero. But Kendal? She'd laugh in his face!"

"No man or woman ever laughed at Kendal," said the other. "And if he can't persuade her, he'll try to buy her."

"Buy her?"

"He'll spread the diamonds on the table before her and make them into the map of a beautiful life. I can see his long fingers arranging Paris and London, drawing out Italy for her. Kendal can do those things. He'd move an angel, if he chose!"

"I believe in her!" said the boy.

"Young man," said the other sternly, "Quay was a well-balanced, thoughtful, successful man, with his mind turned toward philanthropy. But Quay failed to stand against the temptations of that demi-devil."

"But," muttered Fantom, terribly shaken, "he don't care about her. There's been no sign!"

"There *has* been a sign! There was a time the other day when, for the first time in his life, Kendal was helpless in the hands of another man. I was the man! I had a gun covering his heart, but that wasn't my power. I'd seen him prowling by the cabin, I'd seen the face of the girl, and something made me put the two things together. I suggested to Kendal that I'd drop in on her and tell her a few little stories of his early life.

"At that threat, Jim Fantom, he turned to water. His face was wet with perspiration. In another moment he'd capitulated. What he had taken fifteen years before from me, plus a handsome interest for the intervening years, and a little more—to make up for shock to my feelings, let's say, and loss of happiness the meantime!"

He chuckled, and the chuckle was like a snarl.

"He promised all that I asked. Swore sacredly that I should have it all. And that would have been done, except that Quay stood in the way of the fulfillment, of course. Quay wanted everything, not taking out the little that I demanded. Quay had learned greed among all the other evil qualities that Kendal planted in him for the first time. However, Fantom, if Kendal thought enough of the girl to be helpless in my hand, do you think that he wouldn't use every gift that God poured into his clever treacherous brain to take her in some way and to make her his?"

"I believe it, I believe it!" said the boy. "I start on, man, at once! Goodby."

"Wait," said the hunchback. "Suppose that I show you a way to save ten hours on the return to the valley?"

"Save me ten hours," said Fantom, "and I'm your slave for my life. Ten hours!"

"Catch up those two horses of Quay, then," said the hunchback. "They'll be no further use to him. As a matter of fact, it's a white horse that he's riding now, and it's already arrived at the end of its journey, I suppose. That's a horse that's never in the stall, and every trip it makes with a crowded back. Yet it never grows tired."

Hours later as dawn light was spreading across the sky Fantom and his odd companion entered the valley with the two extra horses on the lead. They had changed saddles three times during the night, and they changed again at the valley's brim, letting Quay's two horses run loose on the edge of the woods and dashing down at full speed. The horse of the hunchback stumbled and plunged with utter exhaustion, but Darkness,

with wonderful might still, was gliding on with a high head.

"An enemy's gift," said Fantom aloud, though he had not intended that the words should pass his lips.

"A dead enemy!" said the other. "Kruger's in jail. He'll hang, young man, as you'll be glad to know. That fall he got when he was yanked off his horse fractured his skull for him. The coward thought he was dying, and confessed that he murdered Larry Phelan."

"What?" cried Fantom. "Am I a man free of the law, then?"

"As free," said the hunchback, "as any of us are. There's no ghost of a gibbet at the end of your trail now, my friend."

"But why should Kruger—little Sammy Kruger—kill Phelan?"

"Jealousy, I think they said. Jealousy over some girl—some boys' quarrel at a dance and a little man's vengefulness, which never dies. I am myself a little man, you see!"

THEY had swept down to the floor of the valley, and now, as they galloped, they looked back toward the top of the cliff—and instantly shrank small on their horses and drove them into the cover of the woods. For, at that instant, above them appeared the great Louis Kendal, swinging a tired horse down the slant trail for the valley beneath!

They cut as a bird flies, across country, and at last drew near to the clearing. Dismounting, they held brief consultation. It was best, they decided, to await the coming of Kendal on foot, and at the verge of the clearing. What happened then would be a matter of guns, and the empty holsters of the boy had been filled from those of the hunchback—good guns, new guns, that fitted nicely to his hand—and he swore to himself that, if only the leaden weariness would leave his hands and his eyes, he would kill Kendal, even if he should die himself in accomplishing that task.

Thus they came softly close to the clearing, and, as they did so, heard the pounding of a horse coming up from the far side of the clearing. It startled them both, for it could not be Kendal. Even he had no witchcraft to fly so fast!

And so, reaching the edge of the screen of trees, they saw Chip Lander come trotting his horse into the clearing, and singing out as he came:

"Hey, Jo!"

The kitchen door flew open and Jo Dolan stood there, smiling. "I never saw anything better than you, this morning," she told him. "I've been quakin' all night!"

"Not me," he answered. "I was as snug in that new lean-to as a wolf in a cave with his winter fur on. Doggone me, Jo, but I'm glad to see that you have breakfast started. I'm gunna do things to it!"

He threw the reins off his horse and swung down to the ground.

"Come in for hot water," said she.

"I need cold to wake me up," said he. So he rolled up his sleeves and washed at the basin of the spring, while the girl disappeared indoors.

"You see?" said the hunchback, in a murmur. "They're not in love with one another, in spite of your fears."

"I don't know—I don't know!" said the boy.

Chip advanced, dripping with water, toward the kitchen door, through which a towel flew. He caught it and climbed up the steps, drying himself.

"Shall we go in and tell them?"

"There's no time, probably," answered Fantom. "Besides, it's my war with Kendal, an' not Chip's. He's done enough for me!"

He was kneading his fingers and wrists and then flexing his fingers to restore their suppleness, as Chip ran down the steps and gathered an armful of wood from the woodshed. The girl followed into the open doorway.

"I dreamed it, too," said she.

"That he was safe?"

"Yes."

"Of course it'll come true," said Chip. "That'll be my luck."

"Oh, Chip," said she. "You don't wish any harm to him, do you?"

Chip grinned. "The trouble with me," he said, "is that I've become a friend."

"Isn't that better than to be an enemy?"

"Not a mite! You take a friend, and a girl never gives a hang about him. Lot better to be an enemy. Look at Jim Fantom with you!"

"He wasn't my enemy. Not ever! I liked him right away."

"Sure you did. Because he'd killed a few men, here and there. Then along

comes me, and what had I done but a couple of holdups? You couldn't expect a nice young girl to take no man-sized interest in me!"

"Come in with that wood," she commanded, "before the fire goes out. Oh, Chip, Louis Kendal never will reach him. Say that for me, Chip!"

"Louis Kendal never will reach him, of course," said he. "Nobody in the world can ride like that Jim of ours. And didn't he grab the finest hoss in the valley, pretty near? But tell me, Jo, what'll I do bad enough to make you love me?"

"I do love you, too, Chip dear."

"Hell fire!" said Chip. "You love me like a brother. Well, I'm gunna go out and kill me a man or two, and then I'll be able to come back here and sun myself and sit around and there'll be nothin' but smiles. Two more notches on my guns, and I'd make Jim Fantom so doggone jealous he couldn't see!"

"Oh no," said she. "Jim's not that kind. There's no more jealousy in my Jim than in that mountain."

Chip grinned again. "I'm tired of talkin' about that Jim Fantom," he said. "It never seems to get me nowhere."

They vanished through the door of the house as the hunchback gripped the arm of Fantom, looking straight before him to the farther side of the clearing. Fantom followed that direction with his gaze, and there he saw leaning against a tree the long and misshapen form of Louis Kendal himself!

XII

IT SEEMED to the boy, at first, that Kendal was looking straight toward him, but the next moment the other had left his tree and was moving with long, swift strides toward the house. Over his left shoulder was slung the saddle-bag of treasure.

The clutch of the hunchback deepened in Jim's arm.

"Walk out," said he. "But put your hands on your hips. Laugh at him, if you can. Do something to break him down, Fantom. He's got to doubt himself before he can be beat!"

The boy listened, and suddenly he knew that it was true. With one gliding step he was in front of the tree, his hands upon his hips, laughing!

Louis Kendal was quite turned away, and yet that swift animal eye saw the danger instantly and whirled toward it. The saddle-bag was cast from his shoulder as he spun about, and his long fingers were gripping the butt of a Colt, slung low in a holster strapped about his thigh. He was half crouched, and a sneer contorted his long, pale face as he glared at Jim Fantom.

The laughter which Fantom had forced became real. He shook with a hysteria of fear. His head rocked back, and still he laughed, soundlessly, his hands upon his hips.

When the nervous frenzy passed, and when he could look again, he saw that Kendal had straightened and stood stiff with amazement. Actually he was agape, and then shut his teeth and his lips into a grim line.

"You've followed me here, boy, have you?" said Kendal suddenly. "You couldn't let one lesson do you?" And he started forward.

"Good!" said Fantom, nodding. "Get close enough to be sure of your shot."

Kendal halted as though he had been struck with a club.

"Fool!" said he. "Do I have to shoot you down here, where you dreamed of being happy? Go back into the woods, where we'll be out of sight of other folks!"

"Stay here, Kendal," said the boy. "I have a friend along that wants to see if Louis Kendal can be hit with bullets. I have a friend along that couldn't see you so good if we went back into the dark of the woods."

The harsh voice of the hunchback broke in:

"Ay, Louis. Here I am. Here's your dear old Edgar, waiting to see you clutch at your chest and stagger like a drunkard. After you've died, I'll help myself from the saddle-bag to what's due me."

The cripple had appeared at the verge of the trees, and, at his voice, Kendal turned suddenly toward him. "You white-faced toad," he said, "when I'm through with the kid, I'll handle you. I've kept my hands from you long enough. There'll be a finish to you now!"

"You'll never finish with him, Louis," said the other. "He's the end of your rope and the finish of your trail. He's the last news and the bad news, Louis. He's the master that every man has to meet!"

The mouth of Kendal snarled.

"Boy," said he to Fantom, "I'll do this much for you. I'll let you make the first pass for your gun, and may that start help you!"

"Louis, Louis!" said the hunchback. "Don't be a fool. Your master, Louis! You're talking to your master!"

The long, pale face of Kendal turned crimson; then it blotched with purple and white. The boy could see a tremor run through the tall body, the first tremor of doubt.

"If you're afraid," said Fantom, "come closer to make surer of your shot. I'm gunna wait here for you."

Kendal made half a step forward, and then drew back. Fantom smiled.

"The time's runnin' on, and your courage is leakin', Kendal," said he. "You'd better make your play. It'll be better now, than later."

"Damn you!" said the tall man. "I'll—"

A form stepped into the doorway of the cottage, and a long, trailing scream of a woman rang over the clearing. It drove Kendal desperate, and in his desperation he made his move. As the muzzle of his gun cleared the lip of his holster it was exploding rapidly. A bullet plowed the ground at the feet of Fantom. Another hissed at his cheek.

Fantom fired back. A blind shot, he felt it to be, but it doubled Kendal suddenly to his knees. His gun fell as he dropped, and reaching for it he crumpled on his side and lay gasping.

"Again, again! Shoot again, Jim Fantom!" called the hunchback. "The devil's never dead until his eyes are shut!"

KENDAL strove to gather his strength, but failed, and this time rolled upon his back. Fantom, the girl, and Chip Lander met in a group about him, she falling on her knees and reaching to pull back his coat, for a huge crimson stain was rapidly spreading upon the breast of it.

"There's no use," he whispered. "I'm going out. You've beat me, Edgar. Your damned voice and the sight of you was enough to freeze me! It wasn't the kid." He turned his head so that he could see Jim Fantom. "I should of finished you when I had you in my hand. But every man makes one mistake. Damn you, and may the devil bring you bad luck!"

The voice of Chip Lander broke in:

"They's no devil here now in the Happy Valley, Kendal. He's gone with you."

"Hush," said the girl. "He's going."

Kendal's eyes had closed, but after a moment they opened and he looked up at the sky.

"Edgar!" he whispered faintly.

The hunchback dropped on his knees beside the other.

"I never meant to keep it," murmured Kendal, "but when you found out, then I was forced out the door, so to speak. I never meant to rob you of the money. I had ways in mind of replacing it—"

The voice of the hunchback was suddenly touched with emotion.

"I forgive you!" said he. "Nothing but hate of you has kept me moving these fifteen years, but now that I see you this way, I forgive you, old man, with all my heart."

"She always guessed I'd go wrong," said Kendal, muttering.

"Who?"

"My aunt—your mother!"

The others drew back a little, leaving the two cousins together. Kendal's glance froze on vacancy. It seemed to Fantom that death had come, but suddenly Kendal smiled. His whole voice came back to him, ringing out with horrible loudness:

"Jonathan! Jonathan!"

With that, he died.

* * * * *

Sheriff Bud Cross had become a great man in his community and in his county. He could feel it on this bright, hot morning of the early summer when he left his house and sauntered down the street toward his office. Rhiner, ex-murderer, having been caught, had confessed recent crimes which implicated many. The dead body of Quay, the hypocrite, had been found. Swift rumor said that Louis Kendal, of unsavory fame, revealed by Rhiner as the master mind, also was dead.

The glory for all of this fell upon the sheriff, and when he disclaimed credit, but placed it upon chance and the odd workings in the Valley of a young man named Jim Fantom, Burned Hill shook its united head and smiled at such modesty. Had not even the real murderer of Larry Phelan confessed? And was he not at this moment in the jail, tremblingly awaiting his trial?

This, also, was mysteriously attributed to the agency of the sheriff, and therefore Bud Cross protested no longer but rather grimly set his teeth to wait for the reaction which he was sure would set in.

But he was glad when he could turn in from the street to his office, which was a little white-painted shack wedged in between two of Burned Hill's most important stores. He shut the gate in some haste behind him, as though fearing that the youngsters who trailed behind him might squeeze through. And so he came to his office door and inserted the key in the lock.

As he pushed the door open, the sheriff became aware of fresh cigarette smoke in the air. Instantly his hand was on the butt of a revolver, and slowly he thrust the door wide.

His suspicions were at least in part justified. There were armed men in the room, two of them. One was Chip Lander and the other was Jim Fantom. But they were smiling in a friendly fashion at the sheriff, and in a farther corner of the room sat Jo Dolan, smiling also.

THE SHERIFF released the handle of his Colt in haste and slammed the door behind him.

"We want a marriage license, Sheriff," said Chip Lander.

"I ain't the justice of peace," the sheriff pointed out.

"But you can take the price that we pay for the license," said Chip Lander.

"I don't see why I should. What's behind all of this grinning, folks?"

Young Jim Fantom stood up.

"Because we're not payin' in cash," said he.

He slung a deep saddle-bag over the crook of his arm and poured forth upon the table a flood of glittering jewels, of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and several thick packages of banknotes.

The sheriff stared, entranced.

"The Happy Valley loot!" he said beneath his breath.

"It's the whole layout," said Fantom, "except for some stuff that went to a man that helped me run down Kendal. If it hadn't been for that, we never would of got this! He took around forty thousand dollars' worth, but you can see that they's something left!"

The sheriff approached the treasure with a slowed and awful step.

"Fantom," he said presently, "you've give me a lot of hard riding, but now it seems to me as though it was only a short trail. But a lot of this will come back to you. They ain't half of it that will ever be claimed."

Fantom shook his head. "It don't look like money to me," said he.

"It is, though," said the sheriff. "What's the matter with you, man?"

"Why, I can see nothin' but guns, when I look at it. Guns in leather, guns comin' out on a jump, guns spittin' fire, guns shootin' into the dust, guns shootin' into men, an' the men fallin' to this side and to that. Men lyin' bitin' at the air," concluded Jim Fantom. His face grew pale. "I don't want nothin' connected with this pile of loot. I've got dirty hands, an' I want to rub 'em clean with hard work. Me and Jo, here!"

The sheriff looked from one to the other. "Is Chip the witness?" he said.

"Naw. I'm the chief mourner," said Chip good-naturedly, "in this here company."

"Is it a company?" asked the sheriff.

"Sure," said Chip. "It's a company. Fantom is the boss; his girl is gunna be the straw boss, and I'll be the working gang. I'm gunna be teamster and hoss wrangler and cowpuncher, and all that Fantom will have to do will be to cut down trees, an' cut 'em up, an' clear ground, an' plow an' harrow an' sow an' thresh an' a few little things like that. We're all started for an easy life!"

The sheriff looked at them with glistening eyes.

"The Happy Valley?" said he.

"Sure! Where else?"

"You stay here," said the sheriff. "I'll go out an' get the justice an' the minister, too." He started for the door.

"Wait a minute," broke in Chip. "I'll go along."

"You better stay here," said the sheriff.

"No," said Chip. "It's kind of a small room, an' I hate to crowd it."

So he went grinning through the door at the sheriff's heels. The two lovers remained alone, looking at one another with wondering eyes. They thought neither of the past nor of the days to come, but only of the treasure of that moment, greater than the heart could hold.

SIX SHOOTEROLOGY

by
JOHN EDWARD DALTON

The astonishing true stories of three freak gunshots, told by one of the men who triggered them!

WYATT EARP, Lucky Baldwin, Bat Masterson and I were loafing in Bat's New York office, talking over old times. Wyatt had the floor.

"Six shooters," said Wyatt Earp, "are a short range weapon up to fifty yards. An expert can make a fair target, but beyond that anything like real accuracy is impossible. When Colonel Colts designed his famous Equalizers he had in mind a short range weapon with terrific shocking power. While I was City Marshal in the hell towns of Wichita, Abilene, and Dodge I saw the cream of the frontier men throw a lot of lead, and the majority of their gun battles were fought across a poker table or out in the open at a distance of not over fifteen feet."

"Wait a minute, Wyatt," interrupted

Bat, "seems to me I've seen you do some mighty salty work with a Peacemaker. You remember the time you were running jack's outside Dodge City with greyhounds and that black hound of yours broke loose and took after a big jack?"

Wyatt nodded and smiled, "I remember," he replied.

"You knocked over the rabbit your dog was chasing," Bat continued. "You hit him in the head with an old horse pistol, and Luke Short stepped off the distance. It was four hundred steps from where we stood to the dead rabbit. I wouldn't call that short range shooting."

Wyatt Earp's eyes twinkled, "That's the way it happened, Bat," he admitted. "It was a full four hundred steps and one of the rabbit's eyes was knocked out. The reputation that shot gave me had a lot to do with my keeping the wild crews of the Texas trail herds in line. Few gunmen wanted to swap lead with a city marshal that could knock over a running rabbit with a six-shooter at that distance." Wyatt stopped talking, lit a cigar and after a few puffs he continued. "But there's a story behind this tale that has never been told."

Earp's Incredible Shot

"Let's hear it," interrupted Lucky Baldwin, ex-pearl diver, gun-fighter, and buffalo hunter.

"This is the way it happened," said Earp. "You remember we shot the black dog that night. She had the rabies, got it from a lobo wolf. Well, I had left her locked up in a dog pen. She was one of the best hunting dogs in Kansas and when she saw us ride off towards the open prairie with the rest of the dogs, Midnight Maid dug her way under the fence and followed us.

"The minute I saw her I knew she had an advanced case and was sure to give it to the rest of the dogs. Her eyes were glazed, her lips foam-flecked. I jerked out the old muzzle-loading Dragoon. The hound seemed to sense danger and took off like a streak, yelping every jump. Dog Kelly and Luke Short were between me and her, I couldn't shoot without hitting them, and by the time I had gotten from behind the two men Midnight was two hundred yards distance, hot on the trail of a big jack.

"It was a pretty race, I'd have liked to have seen the finish, but if the hound bit another dog rabies would spread over the Kansas prairies like a grass fire before a strong wind. I raised the old Dragoon, squinted down the long barrel, got the running dog over the front sight and pulled the trigger. The horse pistol kicked and roared, a streak of flame and black powder smoke belched from the muzzle. I knew my chances of hitting Midnight were a hundred to one. You could have counted to ten before the slug reached its mark. But it was the rabbit, not the dog that jumped high in the air, turned over and fell dead."

"You mean," gasped Bat, astonishment in his face and disbelief in his voice, "that you were shooting at the dog and hit the jack? Why that jack was running forty feet ahead of the hound."

"That's right," replied Wyatt. "It was an accident pure and simple, like most long shots with a six-shooter. I couldn't have done it again in a hundred years. I reckon there were a few of the old Buffalo hunters who might have done it with a Henry or a Sharps rifle. But with a six-shooter, even Wild Bill Hickok would have missed that one."

The story interested me. I'd heard it from my father who was there; I'd read about it in books. I'd shot box after box of shells at running jacks, trying to match the shot with my old reliable, a forty-four special Smith and Wesson. I'd shot standing up, lying on my stomach, with one hand and both hands. I had scared a few jacks, but never hit one.

Bat Masterson, former sheriff of Dodge City, and an expert with Colonel Colts famous Peacemaker, turned to me. "It seems to me, Smoky," he said, "that you did some shooting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a few years back that stood the water-front district of that city of a million or so inhabitants on its ear. And while we're on the subject of freak shots, how about giving us the story of yours."

Dalton Patrols Waterfront

"I made quite a shot one time," I admitted as I poured out a quick one. "I was working the waterfront and the red lights with a halfbreed Brazilian-Indian siding me. My partner's name

was Juan, he was a fighter from Who Lay the Chunk, neither pure nor simple. The best partner I ever had. He's dead now—passed in his chips from an attack of lead poisoning with his footwear in place. If there's a Heaven for gunfighters, Juan is there."

"When I took the job, a lieutenant of the police said, 'Clean up the waterfront. How you do it is your problem and okay with us. We will back you to the limit.'

"Rio de Janeiro was tough, tough as Tombstone, Dodge City, and Butte rolled into one. Its waterfront and slums had White Chapel, London, backed off the map. Unlike Tombstone, it didn't have one man for breakfast every morning, it had several. Men and women who died in dark alleys with knifes in their backs or their throats slit from ear to ear.

"There was scarcely a night somebody didn't take a shot or two at us or throw a stiletto in our direction. We didn't worry much about the shots; the dark skinned brothers were notoriously poor marksmen with six-shooters. But with a long slim stiletto, well, that was different.

"In a month's time every divekeeper, dope peddler and crimp was our deadly enemy, and willing to pay a fat reward to the man who wiped us out. A big tough Swede by the name of Hendy Henderson, who ran a sailors' boarding house, dance hall and a string of cribs, hated us the worst. Hendy had a bodyguard, another Swede. One night he pulled a knife on my partner and we pistol whipped him, and then beat him into a bloody pulp with brass knucks.

"It wasn't a fair fight, his kind didn't understand fair fights. 'The Animal,' as he was called by the English-speaking sailors, spent several weeks in a hospital on the edge of the Great Divide and when he finally got back to Henderson's dive he still bore the scars of that beating.

"He hadn't been back on the waterfront long before rumors sifted out of the dives and alleys into the ears of stool pigeons who relayed them on to us.

" 'The Animal,' whispered a slinking little Judas, 'is going to kill you before the birth of the next new moon.' I slipped Slinky the Rat a coin and like a rat he faded into a dark doorway.

"Juan and I talked it over. We didn't buy the Animal cheap, we both knew his threat was no idle boast. He'd make every effort to make it good. Juan and I had two choices: to leave town, or to call his hand and fight it out. We decided to stay and tossed a half dollar in the air, heads or tails. I won the doubtful honor of trading lead with the Animal. Whatever else he was, he was not a coward.

"Our superior officer, the lieutenant, was against it. 'Why risk your life?' he argued. 'Take a detail of men with rifles and shotguns and shoot him down on sight. He is a mad dog and should be shown no mercy.' I decided against the advice. My American sense of fair play won out. In Texas and Arizona men gave their worst enemy a fair break.

Bullet Explodes Shotgun

"The waterfront didn't come to life until the sun was down and the dim lights on the street corners were lighted. So Juan and I waited until the night life was in full swing. Then after carefully checking our guns, we took a cab and drove to Henderson's dive. The place was crowded when we pushed the swinging doors open and stepped inside.

"On one side of the room there was a long bar, on the other side a row of dimly lighted curtain booths, a dance hall girl and a sailor in each.

"In the center was the dance hall floor surrounded by tables. Sailors, beachcombers, percentage girls, and ladies of the half world were beginning the nightly orgy, the air was filled with ribald songs and profanity in a dozen different languages, almost every country in the world was represented. For a fleeting second I thought of the Tower of Babel.

"Then from around a corner of the bar, with a double-barreled shotgun held hip high, stepped the Animal. A woman's voice screamed, 'It's a thrice cursed police.' Heads turned in our direction, then there was a mad scramble to get out of the line of fire. Traffic problems developed as men and women scrambled for the doors or crowded behind the bar or into the booths, any place to get out of the line of fire.

"I stole a quick look over my shoulder at Juan.

"He was leaning nonchalantly against

the door, a smile on his handsome face. His two English Webleys indiscriminately covering the crowd. My own thumbs were hooked over the belt of my Sam Myers gun harness. When the Animal had reached the center of the room he stopped, his face screwed up with hate and mouthing water-front profanity. He was twenty-five feet distant. That gave him the breaks. I'd been caught at the switch. All he had to do was to raise the barrel of his gun slightly and pull the triggers, and the two loads of blue whistlers would blow me in two. He could do it in a fraction of a second while I had to make my draw, cock my guns and shoot. Twenty feet for a hip shot is a long ways and was easy to miss. I would have liked to have gotten closer but didn't have a chance.

"The Animal and I looked straight at each other's eyes. I knew that the next few seconds was going to decide whether Rio de Janeiro's underworld was minus an outlaw or the city short a police officer. Then the barrel of the shotgun swung up, I went for my left hand gun. It seemed an eternity before it came clear of the holster. I was so close to death I could smell it. Then I got the break I prayed for. The Animal had failed to cock his shotgun when he had come around from behind the bar, and the split second it took for him to pull back the hammer saved my life. My forty-four special cracked, his shotgun roared—and exploded. As he slumped to the dance hall floor with a surprised look on his face I wondered why I wasn't loaded full of buckshot.

"A growl of rage rumbled through the bar and it looked as though the crowd was going to charge. Threats were thrown back and forth. 'Let's kill the swabs!' shouted a long bearded, hairy chested seaman. 'There's only two of them.' He hunched his shoulders, picked up a chair and started forward with a rolling gait like a man before the mast. Four or five of his mates started to follow armed with dirks, chairs and bottles. It sure looked as though we were going to have a rough time.

Juan Tames Angry Mob

"It was then Juan drew cards in the game, his Webley barked twice and splinters from the floor flew over the bearded seaman.

" 'Drop your chair,' snapped my partner, 'and get back up against the wall! Pronto! The next shot will land up above the belt buckle.'

"For a long, long minute the mob stood undecided. They wanted to kill both of us, but not bad enough to get killed themselves. Then the ones in the front turned and walked back through the crowd. That decided the mob. In five minutes more the dive was empty. Juan and I drew a breath of relief."

"How come you didn't get loaded up with buckshot?" interrupted Lucky Baldwin.

"The Gods of Luck were with me," I replied. "When we picked up the Animal's shotgun we found it had exploded. The entire breach was blown off. My forty-four slug had gone down the barrel of the shotgun and exploded the eight-gauge brass cartridges before the Animal could pull the triggers."

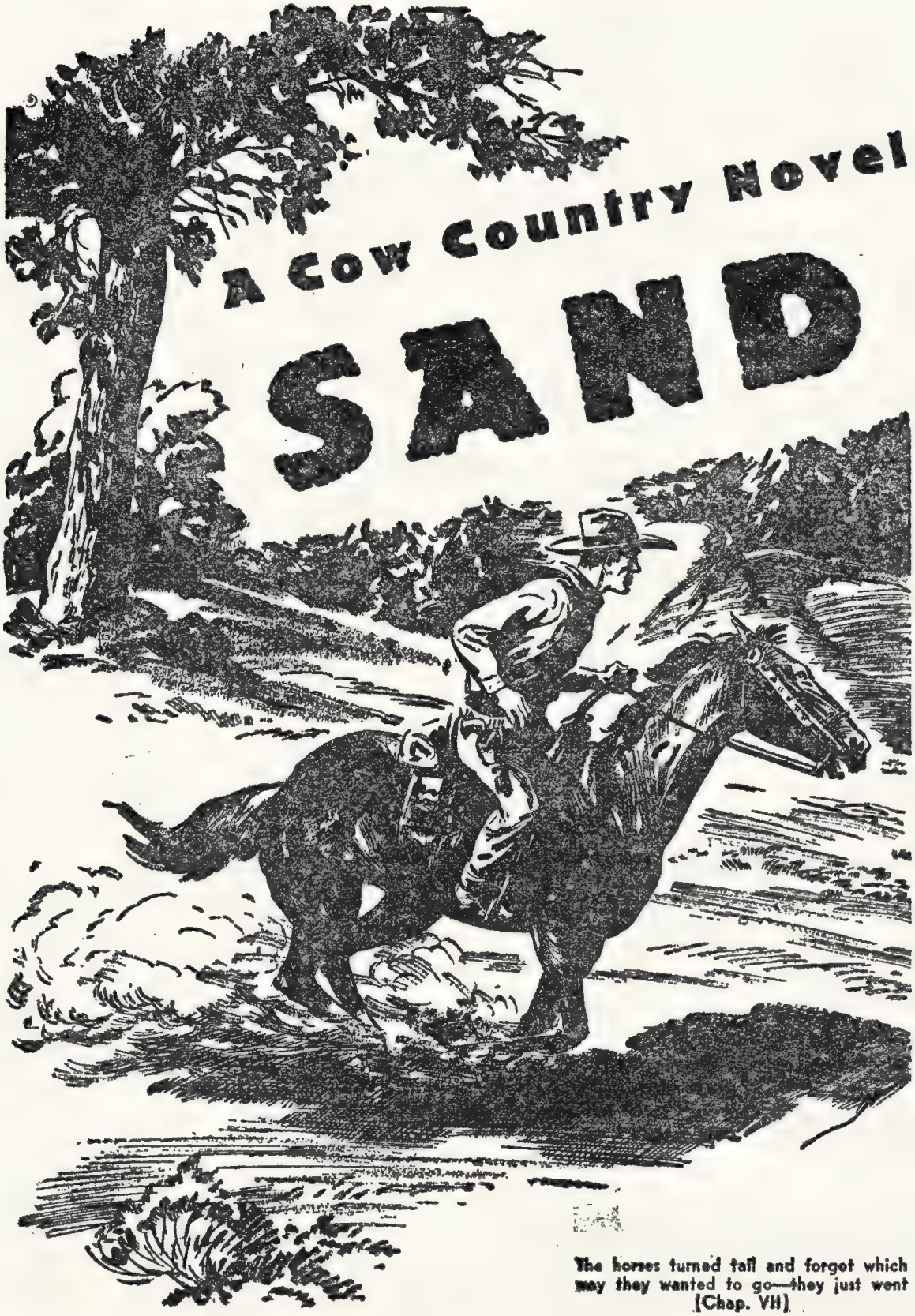
"Did he die?" cut in Wyatt Earp.

"No," I replied, "it just knocked him unconscious. I met him the next day and gave him twenty-four hours to leave town. He gave me back twenty-three. The Animal was passing the city limits towards Mato Grosso in less than one hour."

Wild Bill Hickok's Feat

"That shot was pure luck," I continued. "I didn't have time to aim, just pointed my muzzle in the general direction of the Animal and pulled the trigger hoping I'd hit him some place. The Gods of my ancestors were with me. Like Wyatt Earp's jackrabbit shot my freak shot won the fear, if not the respect, of the underworld.

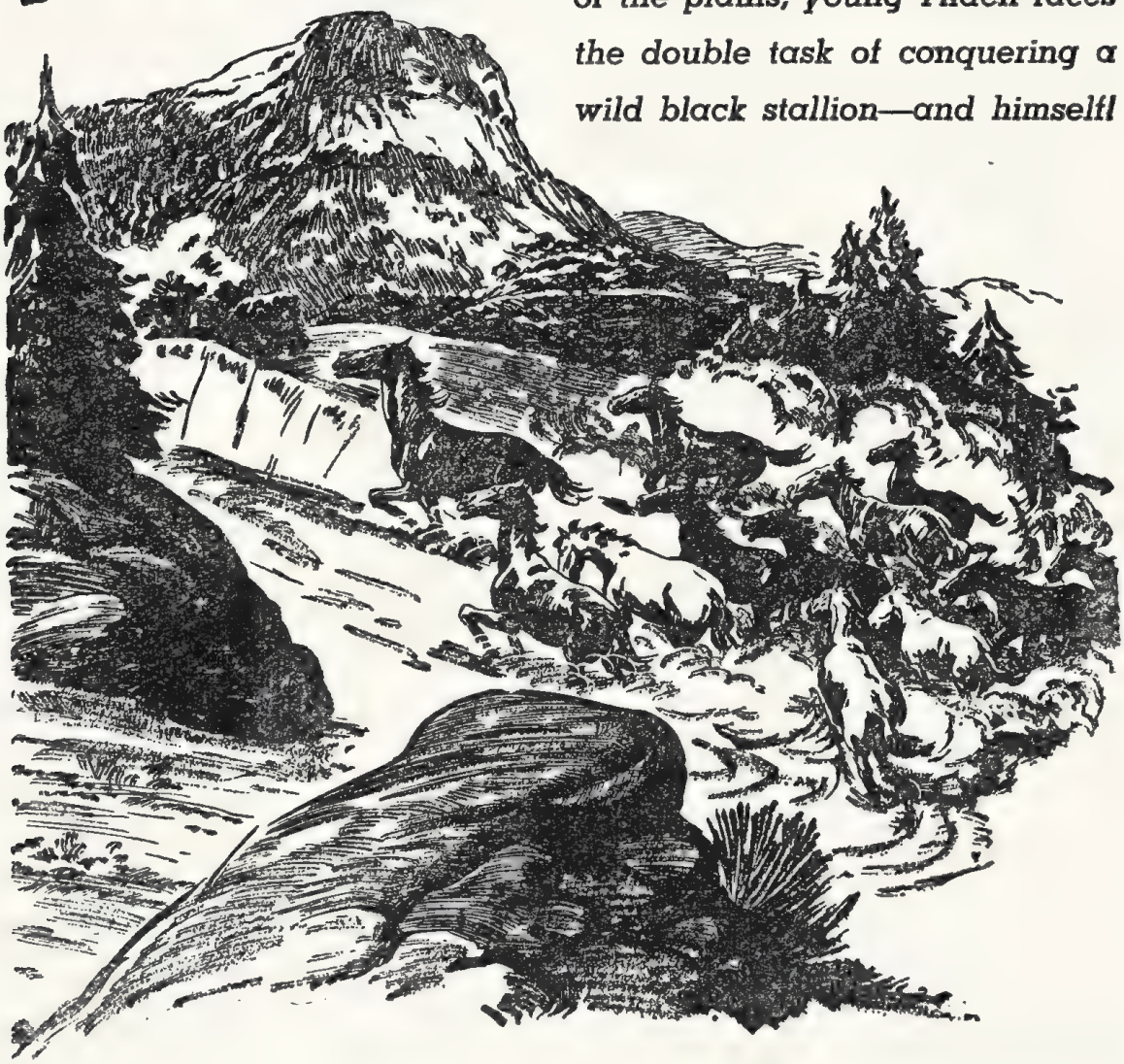
"Down through the years in barrooms, around camp fires, or hunkered on my heels against corral fences I've heard tales of other shots as lucky as Wyatt's and mine. Take for instance the time that Wild Bill Hickok drove a cork through the neck of a whisky bottle without touching the glass. Of course, it blew the back end of the bottle out. It was a hip shot and Wild Bill told Clay Allison that he hadn't even aimed at the bottle, just pointed his shootin'-iron and pulled the trigger. 'I was as surprised as anyone in the crowd,' exclaimed Bill, 'but I never admitted I hadn't done it a-purpose.' "



The horses turned tail and forgot which way they wanted to go—they just went (Chap. VII)

by WILL JAMES

Stranded in Montana at the mercy of the plains, young Tilden faces the double task of conquering a wild black stallion—and himself!



I

TWO HUNDRED pairs of ears raised up and pointed to a ridge behind which the setting sun had just disappeared. The two hundred pairs of ears belonged to the remuda of the Ox Yoke outfit and the eyes of them had spotted a strange object against the skyline. What made the object strange wasn't for what it was, it was more for the shape it was in. It was afoot, a man afoot. . . .

"Must be some homesteader that got lost," says "Baldy" Otters, the cow foreman.

The man was a-going along it at high speed. Then as he spotted the roundup camp on the creek bottom, he came at higher speed then ever, waving his arms

and hollering for help.

Shirt sleeves a-flapping, tore pants dragging and stirring up the dust, the stranger kept a-coming. The foreman, seeing that the coming scarecrow wasn't figgering on slowing down, and not wanting to have the whole remuda breaking thru the rope corral, started on to meet and head off the wild stranger. A couple of the boys went along with him, but before they could get within fifty feet of him the stranger seemed to, all at once, act kind of groggy, and he went face down into the buffalo grass.

The foreman, wondering, hurried to the stretched-out figure, turned him over so he could get plenty of air, and begin fanning him with his hat.

"By golly," says he, as he sized up the looks of him and kept a-fanning, "I didn't know there was any humans like this. Why, just look at that face, Bill," he says to one of the boys near him, "it sure don't look like the sun had ever seen it. But," he went on, "I guess the worst that's the matter with him right now is that he's run hisself plumb down."

A few more of the riders had come up by then. One of 'em was sent to bring a bucket of fresh water, and with the work of a few and the coaching of a few others, they proceeded to bring the stranger back to life.

They carried him back to the fire and worked on him for a good half hour.

"He's the hardest feller to bring to I ever seen in my life," says a rider who'd been using his skill on the stranger. "I used to know a feller by the name of . . ." Then the rider felt the stranger's arm move and cut the story short. "He's coming to at last, I think."

"Well, how're you feeling, son?" asks Baldy Otters after he'd watched the stranger for a spell. "I expect a cup of coffee would do you good." Then not waiting for an answer he went on to speak to the cook: "Warm up some coffee for this feller, will you, and maybe he'll want a little something to eat after while, too."

The sound of the word "eat" seemed to bring real life thru the weak length of the stranger. He raised hisself on his elbows and about that time he felt two pair of strong arms getting a hold of him and raising him up like he was a feather. The boys slapped the dust out of his clothes as well as they could with their hands and escorted him to a tarpaulin-covered roll of bedding closer to the fire. The bedroll belonged to a cowboy who at the time was at a hospital and waiting for some broken bones to knit.

They set him on that bed without unrolling it and, even tho he was some shaky, all hands let loose their holt and left him be. But they stayed close in case he needed help and gathered around the fire, for the early spring night had a considerable chill in it.

That same chill brought the boys to mind, as they noticed the shaky human on the bedroll, that there sure was a scarcity of clothes about him. A few figgered he must of left some place in a hurry, for the thin and tore shirt sure didn't look like no protection against breezes. The pants, which was awful roomy like and had gatherings around the waist, hung on him like a tent. His bony knees showed thru and his ankles to match stuck out from the frazzled edge bottom.

A coat of some kind seemed right then the main necessity and the boys dug one up soon enough. They put a hat on the stranger's head, and then it seemed like there was no more they could do in the line of clothes. Hot food and drink was the next thing, and right about then the cook came along with coffee.

ONE OF the boys poured a cupful and handed it to the stranger, who grabbed the hot cup like his life depended on it. He drained the cup, took a second one, and by the time he got thru with it a tin plate full of boiled beef and potatoes mixed was edged in with the third cup.

Along about then there came a light to the stranger's eyes which sent to say that he was due to be amongst the living for some time to come yet, even if his general appearance didn't say so.

Seeing that all was now well with the stranger, the foreman told him that whenever he wanted to go to sleep he could crawl in the bed he was setting on. Then him and the boys all left for their beds which was scattered on the ground here and there.

"By golly," says one rider to another as they was both hitting for their blankets, "that feller is sure a revelation on the human race. I never seen a skin as white as his nor how that skin alone can

hold them bones together. There's sure nothing else doing it."

"Yep," joins in the other rider. "He's the closest thing to half a man a feller could expect to see. Sure must be something powerful wrong with the poor devil."

Setting on the bed, the stranger went on to finish up all that'd been piled up on the tin plate. Once in a while he'd reach for the coffee pot and fill his tin cup to the brim. He was very busy, so busy, that he didn't notice the men had all gone till his plate was slick and clean. Then he looked up and around him and the only company he had was the fire that'd burned down to big hunks of red coals.

He gazed at it for a while, and as it is when gazing at an open fire that way, his thoughts went around some, but not too much, just enough to make him feel sort of peaceful and contented, the first time he'd felt that way for many a day.

The coals of the fire was losing their light when a rider walked up, throwed some more cottonwood limbs on it, and after the flames begin to play along again offered to help the stranger into his bed, remarking that it was quite a contraption to get into if a feller ain't used to it.

"There it is, stranger," says the rider when he had unrolled the bed. "Hop in and have a good sleep."

The stranger wasn't much for hopping right then but he done a pretty fair job crawling. In less than two minutes the stranger was sound asleep. . . .

When the stranger opened his eyes the next day, his mind was clear enough so he could think over the many things which'd happened to him in the last few days. Going back to the beginning so as to get things straight, he remembered a wild party at some friend's house not far from his home grounds, which was in the city of Seattle. There he'd received a telegram from his father with orders in it for him to catch the next fast train out and meet him in Chicago.

Anyhow, he'd seen one of the girls in the party holding the telegram. She'd read it out loud, and then afterwards, amongst general laughter, he'd got the drift that they was all going to take him to the depot and send him to his dad. They'd all seemed to somehow got a lot of fun out of that.

There'd been a considerable time on the train which he couldn't recall much. The porter had come in often with drinks and special eats which he didn't know he'd ordered. He'd took on the drinks on account of their soothing effect and finally his head had begin to clear some. Then he remembered it being morning, and that the train had stopped. More with the idea of moving around than with thoughts of fresh air, he'd went out of his compartment, thru the aisle of the Pullman and to an open door with steps leading out.

He'd felt the gravel under his feet as he stepped out of the car. He'd spotted a little building alongside of the track, and being the air had felt good and he'd wanted to limber up he'd walked over to it. He'd sat down by it, and when what'd seemed to him just a little while later he looked around, the sun was high in the sky. He'd got up and started to go to his train, but as he'd turned the corner of the building he seen nothing but bare track where the train had been. The train had gone on.

HE'D WENT in the little red building which he'd figgered was some kind of a station, but there'd be nobody in there, just a bare little room with one bench and a stove. So he'd went outside again and looked around, and there, seemed like about a quarter of a mile away, he'd spotted another building, the only break in all the landscape around him.

Figgering that the building he'd just spotted wasn't more than four or five *blocks* away, he'd started acrost the prairie towards it. The four or five blocks he'd figgered the distance to be had turned out to be twice that many, and he hadn't walked so far for a long time. Finally, though, he'd got to the house, but the door had been found open and at a glance he'd seen where there hadn't been a soul lived there for some time.

He'd rested there in the shade of the place for a spell and tried hard to figger ways on how to proceed. He'd looked around the big country again, and his hopes had went up, for away off in the distance he'd spotted a few specks which all looked like they might be buildings, maybe the outskirts of some town.

He'd started walking again, towards them specks, and he'd walked and walked till he felt as if he'd crossed half

the continent, and even tho the specks had seemed to grow bigger and closer, the distance between him and them hadn't shortened like he'd figgered it should.

And then the specks had got in file, one right behind the other, and suddenly they'd seemed to grow in size, and by that he'd sort of got the idea that whatever them specks was, they was now headed his way. He'd wondered if they could be people, for at a distance like that and coming straight for him they'd looked tall and narrow, but he hadn't wondered long. Soon, the leader of them specks throwed up a tail, and playful like begin to jump around and run. The others followed.

It'd been only a short time after that when there'd been no more guesswork as to what them specks was. He'd of a sudden recognized 'em, for he'd seen pictures of them. A mighty strong feeling of self-preservation had took place right then. . . . If they hadn't seen him, he'd thought, there was still hopes. Then he'd noticed he was right on the trail, or path, as he'd call it, that they was following.

He'd flattened hisself close to the ground and begin crawling. He'd crawled for many yards while his heart beat fit to bust, but a fearful hint that he'd started too late had took a holt of him. A big steer, more wicked-looking than any bull he'd ever seen on paper, had come up over a little raise while following the trail and spotted him crawling there, and the others, sort of sensing that something strange was close, had gathered near the steer, all heads up and sharp horns a-shining.

One wild glance over his shoulder showed him that what he'd feared had come. There was no use crawling any more. He'd throwed his short coat at the closest and with a cry of fear broke out with all the speed there'd been left in him. The next he remembered, he'd seen a big camp, many horses and men—and shirt sleeves a-flapping and hollering for help, he'd made for that fast as his weak legs could carry him.

* * * * *

The first couple of days since the arrival of the stranger at the Ox Yoke roundup camp hadn't cut much figure in happenings, and outside of the cowboys finding out that his name was Gilbert Tilden, and the stranger learning that he was somewheres in Montana, all had been pretty well as usual. In that time Tilden had seldom strayed away from his bed. For one thing he hadn't the strength to do that much, and another thing was that his mind was sort of mixed up.

Then on the third morning he was woke up and was told that the outfit was moving camp. He'd got up, poured himself some black coffee, and a few minutes afterwards was helped up alongside of the cook on the chuck-wagon seat.

A thrill was due him, for he'd never rode in a place like that before, not behind the kind of horses that was hooked to that wagon, nor alongside a driver like that cook was. The sun wasn't up yet when the cook sort of "throwed his lines away" at his four-horse team and started 'em on a lope. The wagon rocked back and forth acrost the rolling country and no road was seen or followed.

Then, going uphill, Tilden suddenly looked back at the second sunrise he'd ever seen and the first he'd ever appreciated. And there was more than a sunrise back there to look at and admire, there was all what that early sun had to shine and spread its light onto.

Back of him, Tilden seen two other wagons which was part of the outfit. Then behind that in a hazy mist of dust came the many saddle horses. Still further back came a big herd of cattle all spreading and grazing towards the new camp grounds.

LOOKING at all of that in the early morning sunlight, it came to Tilden that he'd never seen as great a sight in his life. And it being so strange, and all, with the big territory around, sort of stirred something in him which made him wonder at hisself.

The roundup wagon camped finally by a spring at the foot of a knoll, and that afternoon, feeling a little rested and stronger, Tilden took it onto himself to walk up on top of the knoll. He wanted to get good view of the country he was in, and try to figger out what there was about it that sort of scared him and still called him on.

But the country didn't tell him much when he finally got on the knoll and begin looking at it. One thing he felt was the awful size of it, and his own insignificance. This was a shock to him, for

Something heavy hit Tilden, and he was sent a-rolling (Chap. II)

wherever he'd went on his home grounds he'd always felt like he was something. A crook of his finger had always set things a-humming and butlers and waiters and clerks had contested amongst themselves to please him in whatever he'd wished.

Everywhere he'd went amongst the steel canyons of his home territory things had been that way. Even his friends, as much as they'd got to make a joke of him, had respect for his name and his pocketbook, and their clubs and homes had been his by a knock at their doors.

That day, as he set on the knoll, ragged pants a-flapping about his legs, tore shirt a-sagging from bony shoulders, there was many things came to him about life which up till now had been left undisturbed and to rust. Many new lights on many new subjects was stirred, and even tho some of them made Tilden shrink, as they'd show him up for what he'd been, there was others which showed him what he might be, if he only would.

Feeling sort of desperate at all that tormented him, he got so he blamed his father for some of what he was now going thru.

Why hadn't he made something of him instead of letting him go as he had, even if he'd made him prisoner and chained him somewheres? That would of been better than going the pace as he had, and he might of come to reason in time to be of some use, where now. . . .

But soon the blame came back to his own shoulders, for he remembered how his father had time and again tried to reason with him, tried to draw his interest, and even threatened him.

His head was bent over his knees in memory of all of that, and for quite a while his thoughts rambled away back, as far back as he could remember and to the time when his mother had smiled

her last smile at him. He'd been just a child then, but he remembered her well when she left him and his dad in grief to go over the Blue Ridge that's crossed but once in a lifetime.

Home hadn't meant so much to him from then on. His dad had tried to forget by diving into his work and accumulating more millions, and later young Tilden had been allowed to spend any part of them. He wished now he'd never seen a dollar nor ever knowed good tender care. He'd never deserved that.

After a spell he raised his head, stared at the long distances, and there was tears in his eyes, but back of them tears was a light of the kind that's seen in a man's face when he's up and a-fighting. He'd try to make something of himself, that light was saying, so that some day his father might be a little proud of him.

II

THE DAY'S work was done and the cowboys was riding up to camp when Tilden, leaning on a willow stick, come down to the foot of the knoll.

"Well, I see you're up and walking around," say Baldy Otters.

"Yes, a little." Tilden sort of forced a smile. "I've been wondering," he went on, "if there is some way I could get back to the nearest railroad station or town. You've all been very good to me and I don't want to impose on you any more than I have to."

"Well, that's all right," says Baldy, "and I'll see that you get to the railroad somehow. But right now I've got a big herd on my hands and I need every man and rig I have till I get thru moving 'em. In the meantime you better try and get some tallow on your ribs so you can stand the trip."

In the next few days Tilden tried his best to follow up on Baldy's advice and pile up on tallow. Then one day, feeling stronger than usual, he took his willow stick and headed acrost to a wide benchland not over a half mile from camp. He'd seen the riders bringing cattle there and holding 'em into one big herd. He wanted to see what they was holding them cattle for, and why they was taking some cattle out of the one big herd and chasing 'em into a smaller one.

He felt no fear of the cattle as he walked on towards 'em, not with all them riders around. Anyway, he wouldn't go too close. Two bulls was fighting outside the herd a ways. He came closer, and he no more than got to within good watching distance when, happening to glance to one side, he seen a high-headed cow being cut out of the big herd and heading his direction.

"That old girl acts mad about something," says one rider to another as he seen the cow line out from the herd.

"Yep!" says the other grinning. "I guess being turned so often as she has today has stirred her fighting spirit."

Tilden squatted in the grass. He knowed the cow hadn't seen him as yet, and that soon a rider would be heading her to the smaller herd. And sure enough, a rider fell in behind the cow and like to turn her, but about that time the critter spotted him out there afoot and, wild-eyed, came right for him.

Twice she dodged the rider that came to turn her, and every time she made a pass at the horse with her horns and headed on straight for Tilden. She was bound to take her grudge out on something. Then the rider, who hadn't noticed Tilden there before, turned sort of white at the sight of him. There came sudden thoughts of what that cow would do to him if she ever got near, and right about then some real riding was done, riding of the kind Tilden admired so much.

But he missed that. Seeing that the cow had spotted him and meant business, he'd quit trying to hide in the tall grass and about that time he was running for all he was worth.

The closest tree or place to hide was at camp. He had no hopes of ever being able to reach that in time, and when right close to his heels he heard the sound of hoofs he felt like his time had come sure enough. Then something heavy hit him, and he let out a wild holler as he was sent a-rolling down over the edge of the bench. Any second he was expecting to feel sharp horns tearing thru him, and when he stopped rolling and looked around there was a wild look in his eyes, as he seen the mad cow heading the other way and the rider close to her side.

Then he give a gasp, for he'd seen that the rider was a *her!* He'd seen long hair flying to the breeze and under the wide-brimmed hat. He'd seen her riding skirt with long fringe at the bottom, and

little boots with little spurs on 'em.

And how she could ride! She'd lean her horse against the side of the fast-running range cow and he forgot the scare he'd just had at watching the skill she had in handling the mad critter. Sometimes the cow being crowded too hard would slow down, let the horse go by her and take a jab at him with her horns. But instead of finding horseflesh, them horns of hers would only graze the long tapaderos that covered the stirrups of the saddle.

The girl would attract the cow's attention by waving them tapaderos in front of her face the same way as a bull fighter waves his "muleta" at a charging bull's nose, and the cow would start running again. The girl would go to crowding her once more until suddenly Tilden seen the girl do a queer thing. He seen her take her rope, shake out a loop, and not hesitating any, spread that loop over the mad cow's horns.

THE GIRL had no more than throwed her rope on the critter when that animal turned, and swishing her long tail, charged straight for her horse. Tilden held his breath. But that was just what the girl expected the cow would do, and exactly what she wanted her to do.

She turned her horse and raced away and gave slack to her rope till the cow stepped well over it. Then she spurred her horse to his best and as the rope tightened up sudden behind the cow's front legs, that critter's head was jerked to her side and she was lifted off the ground to land in a heap and out of wind with her head under her.

The cow had hardly landed and the dust from her fall had just been stirred when Tilden seen the girl leave her horse, seemed like while he was at full run. The cow was drug right to her feet, and quicker than Tilden's eyes could follow, he got a glimpse of the girl, a short rope in her hands. And a little while later the critter was tied down to stay. The girl coiled up her rope, and turned her horse towards Tilden.

"I'm sorry if you are hurt," she says, "but it was the only way to keep that cow from ramming into you. I had to crowd my horse between you and her, and there wasn't much room."

This wasn't what Tilden had expected, for he felt that if anyone was to blame, he was the one, for being where he didn't belong, and finally he spoke to that effect.

"I think you did a wonderful job, Miss," he says, "and it would have served me right if I had got hurt. As it is, I am only very grateful to you and I'm sorry I've put you to so much trouble."

"You better hit back for camp," the girl said, "because as soon as the cow cools off a bit, I'm going to let her up and drive her back to the herd."

"Can I be of any help?" he asked.

The girl wanted to laugh, but she didn't even smile, and reining her horse to a start, said, "No, thank you."

After the work with the herd was thru on the bench, the girl rode in to camp amongst the cowboys. The meal at the roundup wagon wasn't as usual that evening. Every cowboy had sneaked away for a spell soon as camp had been reached and felt around between the blankets of their beds for cleaner trousers and shirts. They'd then gathered at the creek and came out of there a while later with faces a-shining, hair combed as slick as was possible, and all prepared to do credit to the company that'd rode in amongst 'em.

For the company of ladies was long-to-be-remembered events at the Ox Yoke cow camps. Such events seldom happened and when they did every rider turned out with his best, even the cook.

Tilden noticed the change of atmosphere, and at the sight of what all took place on account of the girl's presence, turned a wild look over himself wondering what he could do. His ragged clothes showed up all the more in contrast of them the riders had put on, and then, for the shame he felt in being amongst 'em, with the girl maybe noticing him, he started to walk away amongst the willows of the creek.

The Kid, the Ox Yoke horse wrangler, was there and going thru what the others had done. His round, sunburned face looked thru the branches at Tilden and he grinned.

"Ain't you going to clean up?" he asked.

"This is all the clothes I have," says Tilden, "and I'm afraid they can't be made to look any better."

"Hell, I guess I can dig up another clean shirt, and maybe another pair of pants, too." He sized up Tilden. "And

I think they'll fit you all right."

The Kid took it onto himself not only to fix him up in clean clothes but coached him along in how to wear 'em, so he'd look as much like one of the boys as possible. Along with that help he went on to furnish some information as to who the girl was.

"Ain't you ever heard of her?" says the Kid surprised. "Why, she's old Butch Spencer's daughter. Everybody knows Butch. He was the horse-stealingest hombre that ever was at one time, and a gun-fighting fool. He's still packing some bullets under that hide of his and on that account he can't ride any more.

"This girl here, Rita, does the riding now, and she's a hand, too, let me tell you, and a humdinger. I don't reckon there's a better-looking girl in the world and if she wanted to she could have a thousand fellers, but far as I know there's only this bronc peeler Cliff Moran who's with the wagon now. He's 'repping' for her and her dad, and I guess she's come to take home what cattle he's found."

RIDERS had started eating when the two got to the chuck wagon, and all was making the rounds at the pots. Baldy Otters and Cliff Moran was taking it onto themselves to contest in serving the girl with whatever she might want, and busy as she was with all the attention, Tilden felt safe in reaching for plate and cup, filling them, and high-tailing it to where he could set and see her without being noticed.

"Where's Skip?" he heard the girl ask presently.

There was a stir amongst the circle of riders and one stood up.

"Here I be, Miss Rita," says that feller. He came over closer. "I kind of thought," he went on, grinning, "being you appreciate good company, that you'd be looking for me."

The girl smiled at him. "I just wanted to ask you," she says, "if you've seen that black horse lately, the one you said you'd catch for me?"

"Well, now, before I answer that question"—he leaned over and squinted at her—"did I sure enough promise to catch that horse for you?"

"Not exactly, but I didn't think you'd be so mean as to keep him all to yourself if you did catch him."

"Maybe I wouldn't, but if I caught him it'd be most likely that I would, cause you see, ma'am, I have no hopes of ever catching that horse much. There's too many out to do that for me to have a chance, and the reason I'm not promising anything is because I'd hate like Sam Hill to have some other gazabo lead him over to you some fine day after I'd done promised to do that same thing myself.

"But whoever catches that horse will have to be a powerful early bird, and a wise one, cause that pony sure don't aim to be no man's nor lady's beast of burden. He's making hisself harder to keep track of than ever, and I'm here to gamble that if any loop is ever throwed at him, it'll be a spilled loop."

"Have you seen him at all lately?" the girl asked again.

"No, not for two months or more, and then it was only for a second, cause he'd spotted me first and he disappeared in the brakes."

"I'm offering ten of my best yearlings to anybody who brings me that horse," the girl said, "So, Mr. Skip, if your ambitions are that way, you better make a hand of yourself."

"I'd be glad to," says Skip, sort of mournful like, "but I've got to chase sway-back critters for this daggoned outfit. How would Baldy get along without me?"

Baldy laughed and turned to the girl. "You'll have that black horse in your corral some bright morning," he says, then he winked at Skip, "even if I have to run him in myself."

"Ye-e-p!" howls Skip. "Let's turn this daggone herd loose now and all go to running wild horses, and may the best man win."

There wasn't a man in the outfit who wouldn't of been mighty glad to follow up Skip's suggestion, but that suggestion was so impossible that it made a good joke, and fitted well.

The sun was still an hour high when the Kid brought in the remuda. The night horses was caught, and the girl roped hers and went to saddling. Tilden wondered at her riding away so late in the day, even tho, as the Kid told him, her home was only about ten miles away. It'd be dark long before she got there, he thought, and how could she find her way then. Besides, she'd be driving a bunch of cattle too.

But his worries, seemed like, had been for nothing. The cowboy Moran also saddled a horse. Tilden seen the girl ride alongside of him and he watched the two till they neared the cattle, bunched 'em up, and started on.

The second guard was going out when Moran rode back to camp, but Tilden hadn't heard him, and as it was he'd felt safe for the girl in thinking that she'd at least have a good escort on the way home. The events of the day had pretty well wore him out and when he hit his bed the thoughts from them happenings was all mixed so that he was past trying to straighten 'em out. He'd went to sleep on 'em, and dreamt of a lady in queen's robes, with little spurred riding boots showing under the edge.

III

SINCE the girl's visit at the Ox Yoke camp a new subject had sprouted up amongst the riders there, and the talks of the evenings had kept to that subject till it seemed no more could be said about it. The black horse had been that subject—the wild stallion which the girl had asked about. And as the talks had went on about the black horse, and his wise ways of keeping out of traps, snares, and loops, there'd been one man amongst the riders who'd listened with wide-open ears to all they'd said.

That man was out for all the information he could get on that horse, and not a word nor move the riders said or done was missed by him. He wanted to catch that horse too, and more so than any of the riders did. And the man who was so serious in catching the black horse was none other than Gilbert Tilden.

As far as the horse himself was concerned, he was just a horse. Tilden didn't know enough about horses to appreciate such as that black stallion was. All he appreciated was the value of him in how he'd feel by catching such a horse, doing the impossible, and that was beyond any price.

So, that's how come that Tilden forgot about trying to get back to the railroad and to his home grounds, as his first intentions had been, and one day, when a rig came by which was headed for the railroad, he only used it as a chance to send a telegram by.

The stallion suddenly lunged at Tilden (Chap. VIII)

It was for his father and read, "Finally found a lead, Dad, and decided to stay here and follow it. Don't worry about me." He added his address and handed it to the driver of the rig, who, after reading it, stuffed it carefully in his shirt pocket and drove on.

As the rig disappeared, all of that which he'd left back there seemed all at once very far away, past, and of another life. He belonged to this big country now. It had saved him, pulled him out of the big hole he'd got into, and showed him a lead to follow. He was going to stay in it now and learn to know it while following that lead.

For he knowed that if he once put a hand on that pony's hide after going thru whatever he'd have to go thru to catch him, that that confidence he lacked so much of would shoot all thru him and take a holt to stay. Nothing would be impossible from then on.

"I wish yo would teach me how to ride," Tilden said to the Kid one day.

The Kid shook his head. "I couldn't teach anybody how to ride," he says. "If you want to learn just get on a horse and ride, and things'll come to you, if you do enough of it."

But Tilden couldn't see things that way, and he felt like he'd need plenty of coaching before he could get on a horse and ride away in half as good style as the Kid could. Riding is sure what he'd have to know about if he was to ever get within sight of the black stallion, and he'd have to know about that mighty well. Realizing that, Tilden wasn't going to let the Kid get away from him.

Reaching in his pocket he pulled out a roll of bills, peeled one off, and went to hand it to the Kid.

"Well, then," he says, "maybe you'll sell me that horse of yours."

It was a fifty-dollar bill, and at first the Kid couldn't talk at the sight of it. "He ain't my horse," says the Kid at last. "He's a company horse and the company don't sell no horses unless they're shipped out of the state. But," he went on, "I've got one private horse I might sell you."

"How much will you take for him?"

"We-e-ll," thought the Kid, "I wouldn't take less than—"

"I'll give you a hundred dollars for him," says Tilden before the Kid could go any further. Tilden remembered how the Kid had once said that he'd never take less than fifty for the horse, which meant as much as to say that, being it was a big price, he never expected or cared to sell him.

Selling a horse for a big price wasn't like accepting money for nothing. It was more like as if he'd put over a big deal, something to brag to the boys about, but with that price it was agreed that the Kid was to teach Tilden the main points about riding, and that way all was put over well with both parties feeling winners.

EARLY the next morning, after Tilden had done his usual work around the chuck wagon, him and the Kid both rode behind the remuda to where the ponies would be held to graze. Tilden had borrowed the cook's saddle. The Kid had showed him how to put it on and how to cinch it. And on his horse, the first he'd ever owned, Tilden rode on to the grounds where his eddication was to begin.

"Go turn that horse back before he gets away," says the Kid to Tilden that afternoon.

Tilden got on his horse and started to do as he was ordered, but as he got near the leading horse he sudden like felt himself slipping out of the saddle and the next second he was on the ground. His saddle horse, knowing what to do and without waiting for the feel of the rein, had turned and turned too fast.

That was sure a surprise to Tilden, and after getting up he eyed his horse wondering if he should mount him again, but he didn't wonder long, for soon he heard the Kid hollering at him, and Tilden mounted. The next bunch of horses he went to head off Tilden managed, by main strength, to stick to his horse. He'd learned to turn when his horse did, and that was a beginning.

Next day was pretty well the same for Tilden. Only difference was he felt stiff and sore all over, but when the Kid told him to "come along" he obeyed just like any good pupil obeys a good teacher. He fell off his horse once more that day, and the reason of that was he thought his horse was going to turn one way and instead he'd turned another.

The Kid took him to hand at that.

"Don't forget," he says, "that while you're watching one horse your horse

might have his eye on another, and if you don't handle your reins so he'll know which one you're watching, you're both apt to head off separate directions, just like you did now. And besides," the Kid went on, "you ought to set up in your saddle, the way you ride now you're setting on half of your backbone and you'll be getting kidney sores. Why don't you straighten up and get your knees down from under your chin?"

Tilden thought on that for quite a spell, then he asked:

"Do you think I would ever be a good rider, I mean a rider like Moran, or Skip, or any of the boys?"

The Kid shook his head, and Tilden's heart went up his throat as he spoke.

"No, I don't think you got it in you. . . . But still," went on the Kid, squinting at him, "you might surprise a feller, once you get onto the hang of things."

"How long do you think it would take before I got onto things, before I could be a good rider?" asks Tilden.

"That's all up to you and what you're made of," says the Kid. "If you ain't worried about your neck much, and go to it hard enough, you might be a pretty fair rider in a year or so."

Being a good rider, according to the Kid, was in being able to set a good bucking horse. Any other kind was not talked of as good riders. So Tilden went on with his riding lessons, fell off his horse and got on again. He felt sore and stiff and received many bruises, but he gritted his teeth, went at it all the harder, and kept his eyes and mind to working on all that could be learned.

One day, while things was sort of quiet around the remuda, Tilden thought of riding over to the herd and watch the boys work, or help some if the chance came up, but the Kid headed him off, telling him in his frank style that he'd only be in the way there.

"Better wait a while till you know something," he said.

Tilden waited, and while he watched the big herd acrost the creek on a wide bench, he sort of wondered if he'd ever be able to cross the gap into fitting with such as them who worked around that herd. He of a sudden begin to feel a little discouraged, for it looked like he had a mighty long way to go.

"Here's a knot you want to learn how to tie."

THE KID was speaking, and Tilden sort of perked up at the sound of his voice. Anything new or which kept him busy was always welcome. It all kept him from wondering if he could make a go of what he'd undertook to do.

The knot which the Kid wanted to show him was the Bolen, a knot that can be easily untied regardless of how much pull there is on it. That one knot kept Tilden busy a-trying to figger out, but he finally managed it.

The Kid also showed him how to make a loop, the different throws afoot and on horseback, how to tie it to the saddlehorn and how to handle the slack to the best advantage after the rope is throwed. He told him of the danger of that slack if not handled right, and in all he got the real chance to learn how to manipulate the hemp well. The Kid stuck a stick in the ground for his benefit, and after a while Tilden got so he could catch the stick pretty well, and then the idea came that he could rope most anything. He was aching to try his hand at something more lively than a stick.

"All right," says the Kid, as Tilden told him of his hankering one afternoon. The Kid got on his horse, and knowing that the foreman had rode away with the boys, told Tilden to come along. They rode down to where a bunch of cattle was grazing.

"You better not try to rope anything bigger than a yearling for a starter," says the Kid as they got closer to the bunch. "Try that one over there on the edge."

The Kid had no more than pointed out when Tilden put the spurs to his horse. That pony come near going out from under him in starting, but Tilden stuck, and his horse, wise to the game, took him on at full speed. The chase was on and Tilden wondered if he would be able to keep in the saddle at the speed his horse was going.

Then he seen the yearling ahead of him, a slick little critter as fast as a deer. He leaned ahead and started whirling his rope, but the first thing he knowed the rope had got tangled up over his pony's head and around his own neck.

He pulled his horse to a stop and untangled the rope, and made another start. The same thing happened a second time, but the third try he had better luck. That is, he at least didn't get tangled up, even if in throwing his rope he

missed the calf by a good ten feet. Tilden hadn't as yet reckoned that at the speed he was going he'd have to throw his rope harder so it would split the breeze that was stirred.

The Kid told him about that, and also told him to try a fresh yearling, the first one was getting tired. Tilden started on again, and the second yearling was took around and around. Two more loops was spilled, and then a third yearling was picked on. Then, true to the saying of the third time being a charm, Tilden caught that last yearling with the first throw.

It was a lucky throw, for it seemed that the yearling dived right into the loop a-purpose, but that sure didn't make no difference to Tilden. He'd caught him anyway.

"Not so bad for a starter," says the Kid, as the two rode back to the remuda.

But Tilden hardly heard him. He was in wonders at what he'd just done. For he'd really done something, something he didn't think he could do, and it didn't matter how little that amounted to, it was a start anyway, and the first encouragement he'd had in all he'd tackled which seemed so impossible.

SEVERAL days passed by in that fashion. Then one evening as the sun disappeared behind a tall-peaked badland ridge, Baldy Otters, after seeing the herd to the bed ground, heard a long-drawed-out holler come from from camp.

"Y-e-e-p! . . . Stay a long time, cowboy!"

Baldy recognized Skip's voice. It sounded like some more of his mischief. Maybe he'd bet one of the riders that such a bronc couldn't be rode backwards, or something like that. Anyway, Baldy was sure that some riding was being done and that somebody else was getting a heap of fun out of it. He could tell that by Skip's voice.

And sure enough. Baldy rode around a clump of willows, and a sight met him that made him hold his breath. But it was only for a second, for it was all so comical that he had to laugh, the same as the boys who'd gathered around was doing.

In a circle, between the rope corral and the chuck wagon, and formed by the cowboys, was a little buckskin-paint horse. He was a-crowhopping around in that circle and bellering his helplessness not to be able to buck any harder. On top of him, and working hard to stay there, was Tilden.

And a funny sight he made there. He was being bounced around from one side of the horse to the other, and from ears to the tail of him. At one time he'd have a hold of the saddle-horn, the next time the cantle, or anything that furnished a holt.

He was all over the little horse and never twice at the same place, and what tickled the cowboys most was that when Tilden would be about bucked off, the crowhopping buckskin would bounce him up once more.

The buckskin played ball for quite a spell with him that way, and then, like as if he was tired of playing, he bounced him up once more and dodged to one side as Tilden came down.

"By golly, that little buck paint is sure a tough horse to set," says Skip, "and you sure put up a ride on him, too!"

"Yep," Moran joins in, "I don't reckon any of us could of rode him exactly the way *you* did. Fact is, you done so well, I think you ought to try him again."

Skip looked at Moran and winked, then he helped Tilden to his feet and slapped the dust off of him a little. "Yeh, I'd sure show that horse who's boss if I was you," he says, "and you can do it, too. Now get up on that pony and romp on him," says Skip, and then, grinning, "and don't forget to keep your feet down on both sides of him. I'd fan him a little too if I was you.

Everything was all set for the second try. Skip eared down the buckskin like he was sure enough a bad one, and Tilden, not seeming to have anything to say about it and going by what all the boys would tell him, was getting ready to climb on.

"Now, boys, I wouldn't carry this too far."

Baldy had rode up. He wasn't laughing no more, and being foreman and feeling sort of responsible for what all might happen on his range, he wasn't agreeable to rough play with strangers.

"This ain't none of our doing," says Skip, still hanging onto the buckskin's ears. "This is his horse, and we're only seeing that he gets a fair break with him. I warned him against him a-try-

ing to ride him too," Skip winked at Baldy, "and told him this was the worse bucking horse on this layout, but that didn't do no good and he said that's what he wanted. So when he turns around and buys him from me I have no more to say."

"Well, all right," says Baldy. Then he spoke to Tilden. "But if you ride that horse you're doing it at your own risk. And another thing, this camp is no riding academy. This is a cow camp and for cowboys, and if you feel strong enough to try and ride that horse, you ought to feel strong enough to hit back to where you belong."

BALDY thought them words over as he rode away and he hated every one of 'em, but as a responsible foreman he didn't want the company to be implicated in anything.

As for Tilden, he was set back considerable at Baldy's words which as much as told him to "get out of camp," and he sudden like lost heart in trying to set the buckskin a second time. He just wanted to find a hole and crawl in it and pull the hole in after him.

Skip laughed after Baldy rode away. "Don't mind him, Spats," he says. "That's just his way of talking. He's only sort of fatherly like, and he don't want to see you get hurt."

But Tilden, or "Spats," as the boys nicknamed him, wasn't in no mood for any more bucking-horse riding just then, and the boys' words more than failed to cheer him. He forgot the horse, which Skip was still holding for him, and he didn't see any of the cowboys that was around. Head down, he walked thru the circle they made, and went on out of sight to where the point of a ridge run against the willows of the creek.

The Kid found him there a while later.

"What's the matter with you and Baldy?" the Kid asked.

"I don't know," says Tilden, in a half-hearted voice.

"I think *I* know," says the Kid, hitting right to the point. "For one thing, you been here quite a spell, about a month and a half, according to the wages I figger I got coming. Maybe you could of stayed on a while longer and Baldy wouldn't of said anything, not if you hadn't tried to ride that buckskin of Skip's. He just didn't want to take any chances of seeing you get hurt at his camp.

"A cowboy can get busted up here and that's all right, he's a hired hand and belongs here, but a stranger straying into camp and getting hurt for no reason is another story, and it wouldn't go well with the superintendent."

"I see," says Tilden.

That little talk from the Kid came just right to throw light on the subject which had stumped Tilden, and somehow when the Kid left he didn't feel so bad. He knowed what to do now. He knowed what he'd done and there was hopes that he could set things to rights again.

He woke up early the next morning and started planning. When the cook hollered "Grub pile," he stayed in his bed till all the cowboys got thru eating their breakfast. He sort of felt ashamed to face them all gathered there. But he was dressed in time so that when Baldy headed for the corral to catch his horse, Tilden sort of natural like found him there alone.

"I'm sorry if I've imposed on you," he begins as Baldy was saddling his horse. "I had no idea that I was putting you to so much trouble or that I was overstaying and taking advantage of your hospitality. I was so interested with everything here that I'd forgot time and most everything else. I want to apologize and thank you for all you've done for me. I will be leaving today."

Baldy looked square at Tilden. "I expect I been a little strong with my talk last night," he says, "and maybe for no reason, but it does rile me for strangers to come to my camp and get familiar with horses they don't know nothing about. It ain't good medicine."

"I realize that now," says Tilden, "and you're perfectly right. And as I'm leaving I'd like you to know that I appreciate you telling me. I—"

"You don't need to be in a hurry about leaving," interrupted Baldy. "And I don't see how you can leave for a few days yet, you only got one horse you can ride and that one sure needs a rest. So don't be in a hurry." He grinned. "I mean that, and I wish you'd take me up on it."

That was the only way Baldy could say he was sorry.

IV

WHERE d'you think you'll hit to, Spats? Expect you'll be hitting back home, eh?"

It was the Kid talking. He'd come up on Tilden one evening as that feller was busy gathering up what things he'd accumulated while he'd been at the camp. Tilden was getting ready to leave. He'd stayed a few extra days to show Baldy he had no hard feelings.

"No, I'm not going back," he says. He waved a hand at the country around. "This is the only home I want to claim, now. But," he went on after a spell, "it's awful big and I don't know just where I'll go in it."

The Kid looked at Tilden for a spell, like as if to make sure he meant that, and then stared at his spur rowels and began fingering 'em. He was thinking, or trying to think, of some place where Tilden might be able to stay. After a while he looked up again.

"I think I know where you can put up for as long as you want," he says. "It's old Joe Deschamps' place over at the foot of them mountains." He pointed to his left. "You can't see 'em from here, but I'll show 'em to you in the morning."

Tilden looked up mighty interested and pleased. Far as he could guess, the mountains the Kid was going to show him was them Skip had pointed out one day as the country where the black stallion was ranging, and it would sure be great luck to find some place, any place, in the black stallion's country where he could stay.

"Only trouble, tho, with Old Joe," the Kid went on, "he don't get much company, and when anybody comes around he daggone near talks 'em to death. You'd have to put up with that."

"That would be easy, I think," smiled Tilden. "I'm a good listener."

"That's fine, then, because listening is all you get to do when you bump up against that old boy."

The Kid went on to tell the good and queer points of Old Joe Deschamps, and according to the outline he give of him, Tilden hoped that he could hole up with the old bachelor. He wanted somebody who would talk, because by that talk he would learn a lot, especially from one who, as the Kid said, was sure enough an old-timer.

"Nobody knows how old he is," says the Kid. "There's some here say he's close to a hundred years old, and how he used to live with the Injuns before there was any other white men in the country. He used to trade with 'em, and trap, and kill buffalo for their hides. He was a scout for the soldiers too, and when the cattle begin to come into the country, they say Old Joe 'took on' a few of 'em, and some horses too. He had quite a herd up till a few years ago, but on account of not being able to ride no more like he used to he had to sell out most of 'em."

There was a question Tilden wanted to ask, and as the Kid talked, he kept a-wondering of a way to ask it without giving away any hint of his intentions.

"I suppose he's a great horseman, too?" he begins.

"I'll say so," comes back the Kid, not at all hesitating. "Why that old feller can break a horse to ride without getting on him, and he'll take the buck out of him and learn him to rein without setting a foot in the stirrup!"

"Wonderful, and I suppose he's caught many wild horses—"

"Yessir. They say he can go out afoot, or he used to, anyway, and bring a wild horse into a trap without having that horse break out of a walk. He's got a way with 'em, and he sure knows how to set traps, whether it's for a wolf or a horse."

"But you don't trap a horse like you do a wolf, do you?"

"Oh, no-o. A horse trap is just a blind corral, a corral that's hid so a wild horse'll go into it natural like and without his knowing it. You sure got to know how and where to set 'em, too."

"That certainly must be interesting."

It certainly was, and the Kid, seeing that Tilden was aching to hear more about wild horses and how to trap 'em, was glad to oblige with first-hand information. He told of how he'd helped on a good many runs, and how Old Joe had caught a few off and on the way he'd set his traps, how some riders tried to imitate Old Joe in setting traps for the black stallion, and without luck.

"That black horse is sure wise," says the Kid. "But I think Old Joe could of caught him if he'd had a mind to. I figger the riders didn't have enough patience, and they was always too much

in a hurry to be going and getting him to stop and make sure everything was set and set right. Well, I guess it's time for me to hit the soogans. I'll see you in the morning, Spats, and steer you to Old Joe's place so you won't miss it."

THE TILDEN who rode up to Old Deschamps' corral was a mighty different-looking Tilden from the one who'd stumbled and fell in at the Ox Yoke cow camp. This new Tilden was on horseback and leading a pack horse, and the look in his eyes was the look of one who knows where he's going, and with confidence of his getting there.

Old Joe took that all in as he came out to meet Tilden, but he was sort of puzzled, for he seen as he come near that here was a stranger in the country, and he wondered what was that stranger's idea of rigging up like a cowboy and going thru the country by his lonesome that way. Most of them he'd ever seen had a guide with 'em.

"Howdy, stranger," he says with a welcome smile. "Take your pack horse up to the house and leave your bed there," he says. "Then turn your horses out in the pasture over yonder. While you're doing that I'll scrape up something to put inside your belt."

It was dark when Tilden headed for the two-roomed log house, and as he stepped on the big stone slab by the door there was another greeting for him to "come right in and set right up."

"If you want to wash and comb your ha'r, there's a basin and everything right there on the bench."

Tilden said "thank you" again. That's all he'd ever got to say since he come. And when, after he washed, he sat up at the table, there was no more chance for him to say much then, only maybe "Yes" or "Yes, sir." There was no room for comments of any kind, for Old Joe went on a-talking, first about the weather, then on what all he'd read in the papers and so on.

Tilden went on listening some more as he helped Old Joe clear away the table, and on till his eyelids began to droop for the want of sleep. Old Joe noticed that, and at the first hint he showed Tilden where he could spread his bed. Tilden remarked a little about his being tired and then crawled in.

The jingling of spur rowels stirred him the next morning and he was up and dressing as Old Joe came in the other room.

"Well, how's the young feller this morning?" says Old Joe, when he heard Tilden moving around.

The day started pretty well as the evening before had ended, with Old Joe still a-talking. "I expect," he was saying, after the breakfast dishes was washed up, "that I'll have to run in some horses this morning, but I'll be back about noon. So you better rest up till I get back. You ain't in no hurry to go, are you?"

"No," says Tilden. He was anxious to tell him about his wanting to stay instead, but he had a hard time to bring himself to speak of that, somehow. Maybe the lesson he'd learned from Baldy made him hesitate. He didn't know that this was different than a busy cow camp.

Anyway, Tilden put off speaking on the subject. What was worrying him most right then was if he'd be welcome to go with Old Joe to run them horses in.

"Sure," says Old Joe as Tilden finally asked him, "I'd be glad to have you. I always like company, and I'll loan you a good horse, too."

Tilden was pleased, and he wished he'd give him some horse that'd buck, but he didn't know what a lot of territory he was taking in that wish, or he likely wouldn't be so strong for it.

Old Joe took care of that, tho. He knowed the minute Tilden rode up the evening before that that feller wasn't up to riding, and he gave him a horse according, a fat and gentle little buckskin which he used only to wrangle on and could be caught anywheres with a pan of grain.

"Tain't often you find a right good horse that's gentle," says Old Joe as the two rode away, "but you're sure setting on one of them few now."

It did sure enough prove to be a good one, and a bunch of horses was no more than located when Tilden of a sudden realized that he was *too* good. That is, he knowed his business of running horses too well, and Tilden had a mighty hard time to stay in the middle of him as that pony dodged around timber on the trail of Old Joe and the half-wild horses.

SOMEHOW or other he managed to stay on till he was out of the timber, but he'd held the horse back a considerable, and when he got down to more level country and where he could see for a ways, there was no sign of the horses or Old Joe. He wondered what to do, until he noticed that the little buckskin wanted to run some more, like as if *he* knowed for sure where to go, and Tilden let him have his head.

The ride he made from then on was wilder than any he'd ever made at the Ox Yoke. Over rocky and brushy knolls he sailed, down acrost washes and dog towns, all at the same speed, and as it kept up he got to gradually enjoy it, like if he was on the trail of the black stallion.

And sure enough the horse did know. Tilden rode on over a couple of ridges and there, right below him, was Old Joe holding the bunch of milling horses.

"I kind of figgered I was going a little too fast for you," says Old Joe soon as Tilden got to within hearing distance. "This is pretty rough country to run horses in, but I'll be going slower now, and if you'll just keep the ponies coming, I'll take the lead on in."

Old Joe took the lead, and Tilden learned to his surprise that these spooky horses followed a man on horseback mighty well, if the man could stay in the lead of 'em. Of course, Tilden had to ride from one side to the other once in a while just to sort of keep reminding the horses there was a rider behind 'em, but as Old Joe had warned him, he didn't crowd 'em.

The corrals was reached in good time, and there Tilden seen some mighty skillful work in corralling range horses. Tilden just took the place of a fence post there. He'd learned at the roundup camp that he'd only be in the way and queer things at such a job. So he'd edged out to one side, and put all his attention on how Old Joe maneuvered around to get the bunch through the corral gate. He was at last where he could watch a tophand at work and right close.

It was after supper that night that he finally seen his way clear to speak on the subject of his staying.

"Why, sure," Old Joe says, "you can stay here as long as you want, and you're mighty welcome! I always like company and that's kind of scarce around here. So if you're willing to batch with me, I'll be durn glad to have you."

"But I want to pay for the trouble," Tilden grinned, "because there's lots of things I don't know and I expect I will be of trouble to you. And then there's the food and quarters—"

"Yeh, such as they are, but don't talk about the pay even if you do burn the beans once in a while. I'll put up with that if you'll put up with my talking."

So Tilden went to making himself at home, and started on to making a hand of himself, around the kitchen at first, and then down to the corrals afterwards. He went out and helped Old Joe bring in a bunch of cattle one day. He helped him cut out a few, and then tried to help at branding, but he was pretty well lost at that last and he stuck close to the branding fire, where he could at least hand out the branding irons every time Old Joe called for one.

"Try your hand at wrassling this one," says Old Joe as he roped one of the smallest calves and brought him close to the fire.

Old Joe had seen the look in Tilden's face and he thought of cheering him up by letting him chip in on the work, and it seemed that he'd understood that look, for Tilden's face sure lit up, and he came towards the calf like a kid goes to a Santa Claus.

The calf bellered and bucked at the end of the rope, and he bellered and bucked all the more as Tilden came near. Tilden slid his hand down the rope as he seen Old Joe do and went to reach over the calf for a flank holt, also exactly as Old Joe had done. But somehow, when he reached over, the calf wasn't there no more.

Then, just that quick, the rope jerked his feet from under him. He was kicked in the stomach at the same time, and in the next half second that little calf, in running around him to get away, had him all wound up with the rope till, when the calf had no more rope to play on, he was right on top of Tilden, and there he bucked and bellered some more.

OLD JOE couldn't help but laugh at the sight, but Tilden didn't hear him, for all had happened so sudden that Tilden was still confused a lot. The calf stopped his bellering and bucking and stood plum still. He was taking another breath to start in again.

That was Tilden's chance. Somehow or other he seen it and he wasn't slow in taking it. He scrambled up, rope and all with him, and he fell on the calf as if to squash him down with his weight. But his weight wasn't so very much as yet, and the calf, being of range stock, didn't squash worth a daggone.

He took Tilden around and around, stepped on him often, and it looked for a while like the calf was going to win. But Tilden hung on to the rope, and once, when the calf had him down again, he grabbed the leg that was closest to his nose, his head was under the calf's belly, and when he straightened was when he finally upset Mr. Calf.

"Pretty good for a starter," grinned Old Joe. And Tilden, looking through his tangled foretop, grinned back at him.

Old Joe caught and wrassled the next calf. It was a good-sized one, and he done it so easy that Tilden was again reminded of his own helplessness, but he wasn't going to let the thoughts of that down him, not no more. He watched Old Joe wrassle three more, and then asked for the next one.

The next one didn't get to make quite so much of a clown out of him, but when he finally got him down he was pretty well out of breath. Old Joe caught and wrassled another calf while Tilden rested up, and after that every second one was his, if it wasn't too big, till the branding was over for that day.

It was that way, day after day, that Tilden started breaking into the game. He rode out with Old Joe every chance he had, and that was often. One day he'd help him round up a little bunch of cattle and try to hold 'em while the older man cut out what wasn't wanted. The next day it'd be horses.

"I'm thinking the young feller is too anxious," says Old Joe to himself one day as he watched Tilden practicing getting on and off a horse. The old-timer shook his head. "But he sure got grit, and that's what I like about him."

One morning Old Joe started to do a little fence fixing, and thinking that that wouldn't be of any interest to Tilden he asked him if, while he was gone, he wouldn't watch a pot of prunes which he'd just put on the stove.

"Keep 'em boiling for a couple of hours," he says as he started off, "and don't let 'em get too dry."

Old Joe was no more than gone when Tilden hit out for the pasture where his two horses was grazing with them of Old Joe's. He circled around 'em afoot and maneuvered till he got 'em all in the corral, and as these horses was used to being corralled every day he had no trouble there much. He closed the big gate, and then, mighty business like, he went to the log stable. A few seconds later he appeared at the door again and there was a rope in his hands.

He was going to rope a horse, or try to, but which one he was trying for was hard to tell, for his rope sailed towards one horse one time and another horse the next, and the loop would twist so every time that it'd been a puzzle for a horse to get his head inside of it if it had come his way.

He throwed his rope twice and the loop didn't even catch air, for it closed every time. Queer, he thought, that his rope should do that. Why, he was even a worse roper now than he'd been when he first started.

He studied his rope for a spell, carefully got the kinks out of it, and made a perfect loop flat on the ground. Then he picked it up as carefully, located the horse he wanted, and let it sail. It sailed on in fine style, so fine that he caught two horses at once, but as luck would have it, he didn't want neither of the horses he'd caught. They was two gentle, old work horses. His loop had went their way, and the horse he'd wanted had dodged and went another.

Tilden laughed. He should always laugh when things like this happened, and right away he set to building another loop. He tried again, and this time, when his rope sailed, it sailed true and over the head of the horse he wanted. It was the little paint buckskin he'd bought from Skip and which had brought him so much misery when he'd tried to ride him at the "wagon."

YES, TILDEN was going to try to ride that little horse some more. He'd never tried to ride him since that time at the outfit, and he'd been aching for another chance, and now that Old Joe was gone would be as good a time as he could find to try him again.

This was a test he'd been looking for and wanting. If he couldn't get the handle and ride this little pony, he'd better hike back to where he came from. So he thought as he gritted his teeth and went

to put the saddle blanket on the slick back of the buckskin.

The first attempt wasn't so good, even as determined as Tilden was, for he missed that slick back by over six feet. So then he went more easy, and after a considerable lot of maneuvering around, he finally got the blanket to where it belonged. Next was the saddle, that would be more complicated. The horse stood spraddle-legged like, as if ready to quit the earth, for he knowed what was coming and he wasn't expecting to be there when it did come.

And sure enough, when Tilden lifted the saddle and marked the distance to the buckskin's back, he seemed to all at once miscalculate by a whole lot, and instead of finding a back to lay the saddle on, he found a rump. The little pony had "gone south."

Tilden had to go look at the prunes and put more wood in the stove a couple of times more before he finally managed to get the saddle on the little buckskin's back to stay. Next on the program was to get up in the middle of the saddle, but, being the little horse was good to get on to, he didn't worry so much about that as he did about staying in the saddle after he got in it.

The saddle looked awful slick too. But what did that matter? In the next second he'd gathered his reins, stuck his foot in the stirrup, and climbed on.

The little buckskin stood plumb still while all of that went on, and he cocked his ears back at Tilden, like as if waiting for the signal to start in. Finally, after Tilden was well set, the signal came. It was just a timid little jab of one spur, but that was enough and aplenty. The little buckskin let out a squeal, and of a sudden his head disappeared from Tilden's sight.

With the disappearance of the pony's head there came a hump in his back which took the saddle up quite a ways and tipped it near on end, and then a jolt, like as if the earth raised up too sudden. Tilden was loosened at the first one of them jolts. He was still looser at the second one, and when the horse went up the third time and the cantle hit him, he didn't feel that third jolt. He'd come down all by himself, and when he hit the ground he faced east and the horse faced west.

Tilden got up, looked for his hat, and then looked at the horse. He followed the horse around the corral till he got him cornered and then he caught him by one of the dragging reins. He got on him a second time, and that performance was pretty well the same as the first one, only it was still shorter, for Tilden lasted just two jumps. The little buckskin was getting warmed up on the subject.

And so was Tilden. There was a scowl on his face as he climbed him the third and the fourth times, and when he tried him the fifth time the scowl had vanished and a determined look took its place. The determined look was still there at the sixth performance, and a grin also begin to appear.

"Better call that off for a spell, now. It's about noon and I reckon we better gather up a bait."

Old Joe had come up on Tilden as that feller was picking himself up for the sixth time, and at the sound of the voice he straightened up pretty quick. He hadn't wanted to have Old Joe catch him at this, for he well remembered what had happened at the Ox Yoke, with Baldy. He didn't know that it would be different with Old Joe, that this oldtimer didn't have the same kind of responsibility that Baldy had.

"I'll show you how you might be able to ride that horse after we eat," Old Joe says, and grins.

"That will sure be fine," grins back Tilden, "and—"

But he didn't go on with whatever he'd wanted to say. He'd just thought of something else and started on a high run towards the house. When he got there the fire was out, and lifting the lid of the pot he seen what was left of the prunes. They'd burned down to what looked like a speck of hard tar.

V

OUT ON a stretch of many miles of broken and rough rangeland was a tall peak, and on the highest point of that peak was a man. In his hands was strong field glasses, and the way he kept a-looking thru them, along with the worried expressions that appeared on his face once in a while, showed that he wasn't up there just to admire the scenery. And sure not, there was a dust out there which he seemed awful interested in keeping track of.

Under that dust was two little bobbing objects, and he'd kept a-watching them bobbing objects till it seemed like he couldn't see no more. Them bobbing objects had went around the peak twice during the day, in a big twenty-mile circle each time, and now they was going at it a third time, always one a-trying to catch up with the other, and at last it looked like that might happen.

The object in the lead seemed to be lagging, and that's what brought the worried expressions to the man who watched, for that man was Tilden, and the moving object in the lead was the black stallion, the horse he'd set his heart to catching himself and which now was threatened to be caught by somebody else.

"Why didn't that black horse leave the country instead of going around in a big circle," he wondered, "and staying in the path of the fresh relay of horses the rider had stationed every few miles."

He'd heard how that horse could never be relayed on that way on account he was always leaving the country, but now it seemed like there was no getting him out of it. And Tilden was mighty fretful, because now it looked like the rider was catching up to him and it wouldn't be long when a rope would stop him in his run for freedom.

Tilden was up on his feet, and he could hardly stand still by the fear of that happening. The black horse went to lagging more and more and the rider kept a-gaining, and as Tilden watched he near stopped breathing, for the rider was only a rope's length behind.

He seen the rider uncoil his rope and make a loop, seen him whirl it a couple of times and then— Tilden couldn't look no more. He sat down and the glasses hung heavy in his hand. He stared, not seeing, and he couldn't think.

He sat that way for quite a spell, sort of vacant like, and then feeling the weight of the glasses he raised 'em up for a last look, like as if he'd just as well know the worst and have it over with. He stared thru the glasses, then he stood up, not believing his eyes.

Out a mile or so away and running along a narrow trail on the side of a steep badland ridge was the black stallion. Tilden had raised his glasses just in time to see the horse make a wonder of a flying leap acrost a wide and deep cut in the trail.

The rider would never try to make that, he thought, but the rider did try to make it and that jump came near being the last one for him, because his horse, being tired, hadn't been able to clear the gap as he should. His hind feet had struck only crumbling dirt, and it looked for a spell like both would tumble over backwards into a mighty deep space.

Tilden wasn't watching the stallion no more about then, he was watching the rider's horse struggling to get a footing on the trail, and not a natural breath did he take till, after what seemed a powerful long time, the horse clawing at the earth finally got a solid footing. When he did look for the black stallion again, that horse was half a mile in the lead and hitting straight out of the country.

Tilden jumped up and down like a kid. "Great horse, great horse!" he hollered. "He'll never get him now!"

And Tilden was right. The black horse seemed to find new speed and hit straight out and away from where the rider had his other relay horses stationed. One more fresh horse might of done the work, but as it was now the black stallion still had too much speed for the rider's tired horse, and all that rider could do was to pull up and go back.

Tilden seen the rider stop and turn. Then he went on watching the black horse again and a mighty pleased grin was on his face as he did. He'd been on the top of that peak four different times when that horse was being chased. They'd been long and hard runs, and after each run, when the black seemed to tire some, he'd just lined out away from the relay strings. Twice he'd went different directions, and now this made it twice that he went the *same* direction.

THAT'S what Tilden had been anxious to find out, if that horse would ever go twice in the same direction. If he did, that would prove that he'd do that a third time and off and on every time he was run. It'd also give a hint of some regular territory he'd hit for whenever he was hard pressed, and that territory is what Tilden wanted to find.

The sun had set when he picked his way down the side of the peak to where his horse was tied. He got in the saddle and turned him towards camp, hardly realizing he was doing so, for his mind

was all on perfecting the plans which he'd made, and now that there was hopes of them plans working out, he went into the thick of 'em and for all he was worth.

He was still in the thick of 'em when, topping a rise, he met up with the rider who had been after the black horse. Tilden was mighty surprised to see that it was Cliff Moran. But if Tilden was surprised, Moran was more than puzzled, for even tho he recognized him after a spell he couldn't account for the transformation none at all. He'd never seen anybody change so in his life, and from a weak excuse of a human to a well-set-up rider.

"Yes," he says, after the howdys was over, "I've heard about you staying with Old Joe, but I didn't know if it was true or not. Got your mind set on catching the black stud, I see."

"Yes, but I'm not going to try for a while yet."

"I wouldn't try at all if I was you, not according to the way he slipped away from me today."

"Maybe you should have had some salt with you," says Tilden, grinning. "I hear the only way he can be caught is by putting a little grain of it on his tail."

The two riders rode on each toward their own camp. Tilden reached his camp, picketed his horse, seen that his other horses had new picket grounds, and then went on to cook himself a bait of bacon, rice, and flapjacks in near as good a style as anyone used to it.

And he really was getting used to it, for he'd been in the country and right amongst the thick of that life for a year now, and over a year, by two months. He'd passed the summer with Old Joe Deschamps, also that fall and winter. When spring come he was still in the country with him, and now he was going on his second summer, and right in the same country.

Right now, at his camp, he wasn't over forty miles from Old Joe's place, and that's about the furthest he'd ever been from it. He'd come here and camped by this spring often, tho, ever since one time, the fall before, when him and Old Joe came to it and camped while hunting some stock horses which, was suspicioned, had been appropriated by the black stallion.

It'd been two days later when, climbing on top of the tall peak, Old Joe showed Tilden a little bunch of horses on a knoll below.

"That's him now," Old Joe had said. By "him" he'd meant the black stallion. "And daggone his hide, I wish I had time, I'd sure give him a merry chase!"

Then was when he'd told Old Joe why he was so strong on learning the game. He'd told him of his plans in catching the black horse. Old Joe had grinned, but he didn't make fun of him because, somehow, he'd had a hunch of what all that might mean to him.

The boy had talked of his past and made a few slips off and on, and Old Joe wasn't at all of the kind who took a long time to understand. He'd understood more when Tilden had refused his offer to help in catching the stallion.

"No," Tilden had said, "I want to catch him all by myself, and my main reason for that is to see if I can."

Old Joe had been for the boy more than ever from then on, and he'd done his best to teach him the game. But in his teaching the boy that game he'd been careful not to let him think that he was doing anything that would lead to catching the black horse. Tilden had been sensitive about anything like that. So Old Joe had to be sort of underhanded in his teachings.

He'd showed Tilden how to trail stock, and as the two rode together he'd kept a-telling of their ways. He'd showed him how a feller can keep from getting lost in any country. "Just keep a-looking back over your shoulder every once in a while," he'd said, "and get acquainted with the country behind you. Then spot a few landmarks now and again and keep a-spotting 'em."

WITH Tilden so anxious to learn that way, the winter had gone by pretty fast. Spring come before he'd knowed it, and summer, with all its riding and promises of new experiences, was going by pretty good too. Too good, for he wanted to have the black stallion as his before fall come, and it wasn't so far away now.

As he set by the fire of his camp that night, after he'd met Moran, he went to figgering on how that black horse might be caught. The main thing now was the saving of time, how to catch the horse as soon as possible and before somebody else did catch him.

Moran hadn't been far from doing

that today. He had one way mapped out but that would take time, maybe two months, but he'd have to take that chance for it was the only way he could think of.

He was up at daybreak the next morning, and his outfit all packed. He was riding one horse and leading two, and the horse he was riding was none less than the little buckskin which had bucked him off so often. His intentions was to find that black horses's tracks, and follow 'em till they led him to his hiding place, if he had one.

He run acrost the tracks a half a mile or so from his camp, and the sight of 'em meant a heap more to Tilden than anything he'd ever glimpsed at for a long time. Leading his horses, he followed the trail of the black on foot, like if he was afraid he might lose sight of 'em if he was mounted.

He followed up the trail for four days, and without ever getting a glimpse of the black. But that was all right, he didn't expect to, and all he wanted to learn was if the black had a hiding place or what country he'd got thru in his running away from his usual range.

It was on the morning of the fifth day that Tilden left off following the black horse's trail and started back towards home, and he felt disappointed to learn that the black horse didn't seem to have no certain territory to hide in. He was sure of that, because the night before he seen by that horse's tracks that he was heading back to the range where he'd been run out of.

By them tracks he also seen that the horse was taking his time and feeding and resting. Maybe it would be quite a few days yet before he could be seen in the Big Basin, and a few days more before he found the bunch of mares which he'd appropriated from Old Joe's stock horses, but he was coming back sure enough. Then somebody would run him some more and he'd fool that somebody by quitting the country again.

Tilden sure hoped for that last to happen, and he also hoped that the horse would never quit coming back even if rider after rider did make it hard for him to stay in the country. But he worried, because that horse had the reputation of ranging pretty well where he happened to be, and it hadn't mattered where much, so long as no riders bothered him.

The last year or so had been the only time he'd stayed in one country so long, and as Old Joe had guessed, the reason for that was Old Joe's mares which had been raised close to home, and they was hard to drive away.

But even as it was, with the horse always coming back to the country, a feller could never tell when he'd get tired of being chased and go to leaving it for good. And what's more, a feller could never guess how that horse was going to run one day from the next, and for that reason he couldn't be caught by relay strings and no trap could be set for him to run into because he couldn't be made to turn.

He was too fast, and he never went in the same direction twice. Not till that day when Tilden took up his trail.

There was chances that he would come the same way again, but anybody knowing that horse would never bank on it. There was more chances of him leaving the country than to ever make the mistake of going over the same place too often when being chased. His freedom had lasted because he'd never ranged or run in any perticular place, not till the last year.

Tilden got to fearing that he might be easier caught on that account, maybe too easy. But as he thought on that it wasn't long when he begin to grin.

IF TILDEN ever used his head before in his life, it had been just easy as compared to the way he was using it now. He made camp on top of a long, juniper covered ridge which he'd rode along on top of a couple of days before while tracking the black horse.

The ridge was about a mile long, and Tilden, sizing it up, seen that the junipers was awful thick on both sides of it. There was a lot of dry ones too, and on top of the ridge there was very few of the cedars. The top of that ridge was just the kind of a place a suspicious wild horse would want to run along on, he thought. It was no wonder the black horse had took it.

He kept on a-sizing up the ridge, and using his head as he was, it wasn't so very long when some sort of idea begin to take shape up there. The new idea sort of originated from the first plans he'd made, and that had been to find the black horse's hiding territory, then build a big tall fence around it, leaving

a big opening for the horse to come into without his knowing, then close it before the horse could come out.

He kind of laughed at that idea now, something better was beginning to crop out. As he was walking along, thinking, he'd come up against a few dead junipers all leaning and one holding up the other. There was no going thru them, and there's where the idea struck him, what a fence they'd make.

In half an hour, Tilden had over a rod of fence up. It wasn't a fence that would stand the weight of a wild horse if such would hit it, but no wild horse would ever hit that. They're too wise to the sharpness of them limbs. And as it was, it was a better fence than any woven wire could of made.

It averaged eight feet all along, and as Tilden went on top of the ridge to look down at it, he seen how well it blended in with the other trees. The dead junipers didn't at all look as if they'd been set there for any purpose, and mixing in with the live trees and other dead ones that was on the ground or standing up, no horse would ever suspicion that a fence was there till he come alongside of it.

It was long after dark when he hit back to his camp and crawled into his blankets, and it was quite a spell later before he could get to sleep. When he did it was with a vision of a long ridge flanked on both sides with a well-hid juniper fence, and right between, on top of that ridge, was a long-maned black horse a-loping along and making the vision complete.

VI

FROM early the next morning Tilden start building his trap, for that's what it would be, a wild-horse trap. Not of the kind with long wings on the sides which horses are run into, but more of the kind where a horse would go in of his own accord, without his knowing, and while he's trying to make a getaway. The only thing was, would the horse he wanted ever come this way again?

He was working along one day when, stopping a minute to take a breath, he heard the sound of running hoofs. He heard a heavy breathing, and then in a cloud of dust came an apparition that just about took Tilden's breath away.

It was the black stallion.

Tilden just stood there and gawked. The horse he'd set his heart to getting passed by, not over thirty yards away. A little later he sighted the horse again, still going strong, and up a slope above the point of the ridge. He'd gone on his long circle once more, and near on the same trail that Tilden had trailed him on a couple of weeks before. In another week or more he'd be back in the Basin again and with Old Joe's mares, then somebody would run him another time.

There was no rest for such a horse. Tilden more than hoped that the horse would try and make another getaway on this long ridge. He felt sure that he would now. Hadn't he come up this way three times already?

If Tilden worked hard and fast before, that had little to do with the way he worked now, and before another week went by he had a trap built that'd fool even the human eye. The entrance into it was on top of the ridge and about fifty yards wide.

From that entrance the trap took in the shape of a heart, the fence falling on both sides of the ridge to run alongside of it and to a point around the upper end. At the point of the heart-shaped trap was a little stockade corral where the horse could be run into to be caught.

The distance from the big entrance to the corral was near half a mile. By the time the horse would get in the big trap and find out he was caught, Tilden could have a rope, which he'd already fixed with hanging rags, stretched from one side of the entrance to the other. Then he could go ahead and close it up with dead junipers which he had ready for that purpose.

Satisfied that the trap was now ready, Tilden had no more to do but wait. He waited at the entrance for two days. As he waited he got to thinking. He'd planned to catch the horse after somebody else had more or less chased him his way. He felt he would be benefiting from somebody else's work, and there he realized sudden that if he caught the horse that way, he really wouldn't be the one who done the catching.

He'd get ready right away, he decided, and try his luck at trailing the black horse and maybe get him to come up on the long ridge into the trap. He had three pretty fair horses. They was in good shape to run, and if he used two

to relay on, the best one for the last lap towards the trap, he didn't see why he couldn't do all by his own self.

On the afternoon of the second day he went back to his camp to straighten up his outfit so to have it all ready to put away first thing in the morning. Bedding and all was going to be hoisted up a cedar tree till he come back, for he was to take nothing with him but a few strips of jerky. He'd be traveling light and fast.

It was evening when he went up to the entrance of the trap again. He wanted to make sure that everything was set and he was starting to walk back, all mighty pleased with himself, when the sound of running hoofs coming along the ridge made him turn. He seen a dust and he dodged behind a juniper.

And sure enough, here come the black stallion as big as life, and sailed straight into the entrance of the trap!

He stayed tense and only his eyes showed what all was going on in his mind. He'd wait a second till the horse was out of sight, and then he'd run and close the entrance with the rope and cedars. He was just about to spring up and make that run when the sound of more running hoofs made him squat back to where he was.

And he wasn't any too soon, for it seemed like not more than a wink later when another horse went by him on a tight run. This one was a long-bodied sorrel, and there was a rider on him.

TILDEN could do nothing but stare. One minute the horse was his, and the next he was somebody else's, just like that, and before he could make a move.

He watched the rider, now off his horse, tie the rope with its spooky-looking rags fastened to it across the entrance, and then drag up the dry cedars which he, Tilden, had stacked there for his own use. The rider was placing them along the rope of the entrance, when Tilden at last come up to him.

The rider was Moran. "Why, hello there, Spats," he said. "Sure a dandy trap you got here. I'd never caught the black stud without it."

"Did you know this trap was here?"

"Why, sure I knowed it," says Moran, "that's why I followed the black stud on in."

"Been sneaking around, huh?"

"Not so's you'd notice it." Moran pointed to a flat-topped butte which wasn't more than a mile from the trap. "You can see good from up there. I spotted you working on this trap with my field glasses—"

Moran stopped talking, and the grin went from his face as he stared up a slope above the point of the trap. Going up the slope a half mile away was a horse. The long, flowing mane and tail identified him as the black stallion, and he was free as the hawk that soared above him.

In no time, Moran had unfastened the rope at the entrance, pushed a few junipers to one side, caught his horse, and rode on thru towards the upper end of the trap. A big surprise was waiting for him there, for the trap didn't seem to have no upper end, a big gap had been opened in the side of the dry juniper fence and all traces that one had ever been there was gone.

Tilden came up a-panting a few minutes later, and stopped in his tracks as he seen the opening in his fence. He was just as surprised as Moran, but a heap more pleased at realizing what this opening had done for him. It had given him another chance—and not only that.

"Did you do this?" Moran asked, as Tilden came panting up behind him.

It was Tilden's turn to grin, "No," he says, "but I'd be mighty proud of myself if I had. Better take a little salt with you next time you go after that black horse." Then of a sudden he got serious. "And let me tell you," he went on, "that the next time you try to catch that horse in this trap, there'll be something else than an opening waiting for you!"

"What, for instance?"

"A thirty-thirty slug," says Tilden without blinking.

Moran grunted. "Huh, you couldn't hit the side of a barn with a shotgun," he says, "not even if you was inside of it!"

Tilden watched him ride away, then he turned to study the hole in the fence. It was queer, he thought, how come that opening to be there. It had all been up and solid just that morning when he'd went all around to look the trap over. He sized up the opening. Whoever had done it sure had been perticular in brushing out all the signs of the fence.

It would be no job to close that opening again, he decided, not more than

half a day's work. He looked at the tracks the black horse had made, just to see if he'd skirted around any while inside and maybe against the fence, but when tracks had led straight to the opening natural like, he was sure that the horse hadn't suspicioned anything. He'd come again.

Tilden walked back to the opening, and it was while fooling around the edge of it a bit that he run acrost both heel marks and then a whole print. He stared at it, knowing at a glance that he hadn't made that print, it was too small. It looked like a lady's.

A lady! Could it be Rita? Was it her who had made the opening in his trap? It was possible, but if it was her, was she on Moran's side or his? Did she make the opening so that Moran couldn't catch the horse, or did she plan that so he, Tilden, would be the loser if he'd run the horse in the trap?

HE WAS thinking strong on the subject, when he heard a twig snap a ways behind him and the brushing of saddle leather against juniper limbs. He turned, and riding out of a thick patch of junipers, he seen a rider heading his way. After a spell, and as the rider come closer, he recognized Rita Spencer.

"I thought I'd come and tell you about this, this hole in the fence," she says, waving at the opening. "You see, I had an idea that Moran would try and use your trap to catch the black horse in. He just as good as told me so the other day, and I didn't think that was a fair thing for him to do.

"So when I heard he would try and carry it thru today, there was nothing for me to do but tear a hole in your fence and give the horse a chance to slip away. I hated to go against Moran, but there was no other way, and as it is now I feel guilty, like I'd done something sneaky or small."

"Too bad you feel that way," says Tilden. "For my part I think you did a great thing, and I appreciate it more than I can ever tell you. Would you mind having me ride along with you and see you home?"

"I'd be glad to have your company, but I'm afraid if Moran seen us together he'd know then it was me who made the hole in the fence. You see," she smiled, "I feel pretty guilty."

"I'll ride just a little ways then." Tilden had managed to make quite a stand. "And I'll leave you to go on alone as soon as we see the lights at your house."

"All right, then, if you wish."

Tilden had admired Rita the first time he'd set eyes on her. And now, as they rode on together, this girl, which he figgered had no equal in the world, not only seemed to welcome his company, but invited him to come over to dinner some day, any day.

He took her at her word, for during the next few days he visited the Spencer ranch twice. Another two days went by and Tilden rode to the Spencer home once more.

That would be his last visit for a while, because the next day he was figgering on riding out to the Basin. The black horse would be back there most any time now and he wanted to be the first one there when he did come. He wanted to see Rita once more before leaving, and he hoped she wouldn't mind his coming so often.

He rode on in and towards the corrals to tie his horse, and spotted Moran a-standing there, like as if he'd been waiting for him.

"If you've come to see Miss Spencer," he says, "you've wasted your time, because she ain't home."

"Her horse is here," smiled Tilden, "and she can't be very far away."

"But she ain't home," Moran repeated, "not to *you*, anyway!"

Tilden stopped, and his smile faded away as he looked at Moran. "If she's not home," he says, "or she doesn't care to see me, I'll find out without *you* telling me!"

"Some folks have sure got a lot of nerve," remarked Moran, as he noticed that Tilden was going to wait.

"Who do you mean by 'some folks'?"

"You, for instance. Anybody that ain't got no more consideration as to come and pester a girl the way you pester Miss Spencer sure don't amount to much. You ought to see that she just tolerates you because she don't want to hurt your feelings. If you wasn't a pore halfwit that needs sympathy, she'd ask you to hit the breeze a long time ago. But she feels sorry for you and invites you over once in a while, and you take advantage of that and work on her sympathy for all you're worth."

Tilden stood by his horse and looked

at Moran. "Well," he says, his jaw set and lips hardly moving, "if it's your intentions that I shouldn't see Miss Spencer, you've sure succeeded! But look out if this is a trap," he went on. "There might be a hole in it!"

The ride back to camp was sort of hazy to Tilden, and when he got there he hardly realized it. What Moran had told him, along with what he himself figgered out, was more than a blow to him, and he was having a hard time coming out of it. The thought of being pitied and tolerated on account of his helplessness was where the hurt layed most.

Well, he decided he wouldn't pester anybody any more. And that wouldn't be all, he'd show 'em all how he wasn't so useless.

HE SPENT the forenoon in mending the hole in the trap. He went all around it good after that, seen that the entrance to it was all straightened up and ready, and then he begin to hoist all of his camp outfit up a juniper tree, all of it but the jerky which Old Joe had stuffed in the pack bag for him.

Great Old Joe, he thought, one real friend that he wasn't pestering. Besides the jerky he took a little salt, too. That'd been Old Joe's advice that he should never leave that behind, even if he took nothing else.

The sun was straight up above him when Tilden topped off the little buckskin and, leading the other two horses, rode away towards the black horse's territory. He made a dry camp that night, changed horses twice the next day. The same on the day after, and on the evening of that day he made camp, with jerky and salt and a saddle blanket, by the spring just a few miles from the tall peak that overlooked the Big Basin.

Each day for two weeks he watched, and made a big circle, without seeing a sign of the black stallion nowheres. Then one morning a cold wind was a-blowing and Tilden realized that before many weeks now there'd be snow, and then the black horse would quit the Basin for good and hit for his winter range. Wherever that was at, nobody had ever seemed to find out.

It begin to rain, and before the day was over a steady drizzle had settled over the country. Tilden stayed in his camp and made a shelter. Then he gathered dry junipers and started a fire. A couple of days went by when Tilden could do nothing but stay under the shelter and keep the fire going. And then, not at all according to what could be expected, the skies lightened up and some clear blue showed in the big territory above.

Tomorrow Tilden would be riding again, and he was glad for that, because his thoughts, with the past, and then the present with the black stallion, Rita and Moran had all left him in a tangle that'd take a heap more than thoughts to get him out of. He was called on for action, and that he figgered on furnishing.

Tilden, knowing the horse by now, wondered how he'd stayed in the Basin as long as he did. It was like as if he'd been sort of challenging any man to catch him and got pleasure in outwitting 'em. Here, he'd planned to get the horse before the first snow fell, and now it seemed that that horse had just left the earth and hid amongst the clouds above.

But that would of been better, if such he'd figgered, than have somebody else catch the horse. Not that he was selfish in that way, for the horse was to anyone who could catch him. It was a contest, and where the winner got the honors. But Tilden didn't care about the honors. There was more than that for him, and he was contesting for all he was worth.

He was still at that when, fogging along on blind trail as usual, he spotted a rider. Tilden's first thought was of Moran, for that rider was sure doing some tall riding. He wondered if that rider had found and was fogging on the trail of the black stallion.

But when night came on and he hit back for his camp, he seen where all his wondering had been wrong, for a-standing there by a fresh-built fire was Old Joe busy mixing something. Tilden found out afterwards that the rider he seen had been Old Joe hisself, and doing nothing but looking for him.

"I'm sorry to have to inform you, Bert," he says when Tilden rode in, "but I'm thinking the black stud left the country for good."

Tilden jumped up at them words. "What makes you be so sure?" he asks.

"Well," says Old Joe, "I was riding along outside the lease the other day, and I seen my mares have come back.

The bunch he stole from me last spring. He'd never let 'em get away before.

"Now," Old Joe went on, as he seen how Tilden was absorbing the news, "if a feller knowed where he's hit to, what I mean is, if a feller knowed where he ranges of winters, there'd be a good chance to get him, because there's where I think he's gone, on his winter range. And it must be *some* place, some place where it's low and rough and where nothing but an eagle can look into."

Tilden was quiet for a long spell. Like Old Joe, he kept a-staring at the fire. Finally, he spoke.

"I'm going to be that eagle, Joe," he said, still staring.

VII

TILDEN returned with Old Joe to the cabin. Next day a November blizzard set in. After that, more storms came on, one right after another, with only a very few days of clear weather between. Tilden sure hated to give up the chase until spring, but there was nothing else to do.

Then one day, right after an early spring storm, he run in the three horses he'd used the summer before and begin to grain 'em. He was getting prepared.

"If the black stud ain't already caught," says Old Joe one evening, "and if he comes back to the Basin, why, I've got a hunch he's going to be yours. And say," he went on, "better try out that big blue horse of mine sometime. If you want to use him you're sure welcome. He's a mighty fast horse, and that's what you'll need."

"Thanks, but—" Tilden was about to refuse, then he thought better of it. "All right," he says, "I'll be glad to take him if you don't need him. I'll more than have use for him, if the black is not already caught."

"If the black horse is not already caught." Old Joe had mentioned that too, and Tilden had often thought of the same. He'd tried to forget that such could be, and, as he rode out on Old Joe's big blue horse one day that thought came back to him and he had a hard time shaking it. But he did shake it at last. If the black stallion was caught, he figgered, he'd heard about it, for that horse was too well known and too many would of scattered the news.

No, he couldn't be caught. He'd come back to the Big Basin before long again, and, if not, his hiding place would have to be found, and regardless of where that was he, Tilden, would find it. He'd keep on searching till he did.

Tilden kept his horses on a dogtrot and jogged along. His thoughts was on the black horse steady, and only one landmark did he keep track of. That was the flat-topped butte near which the trap was. If he kept on riding he'd reach the spring near it by sundown. Ahead and to the left of him was a little bunch of horses. His thoughts was hardly checked by the sight of 'em. For he figgered it was still too early in the year for the black horse to be back and amongst any of 'em.

The horses hadn't seen him as yet and he thought some of riding closer to 'em, but there was no use in doing that, and being he still had a long way to go, there was no time to waste. He took another glance at 'em, and was just about to start riding on, when one of the horses in the bunch caught his attention and caused him to stare.

That one animal, which before had been feeding, had of a sudden raised a head, sniffed the air, and then begin to circle around the bunch like as if worried about something.

Tilden stared unbelieving. It was the black stallion!

Tilden rubbed his eyes. Then, wanting to make sure that his imagination wasn't getting the best of him, he pulled out his field glasses and thru them he stared some more. And even then, as close a look as he got of that horse, he had a hard time making himself believe that it was none less than the black stallion. Tilden had primed himself for some tall riding and a heap of hunting before hoping to ever set eyes on that horse again, and now here he was like as if he'd just dropped from above and, as you might say, right in his hands.

The black stallion had quit circling around the bunch. The breeze had shifted and didn't carry no more scent of any human around. But the horse, being wise, was watching. He was out in the open and he knowed where to hit to if a rider showed up. That would be up the long ridges toward an open pass.

Tilden thought that's what the horse would do, that being out of the Basin as he was, and if a rider took after him,

he'd now hit towards the juniper ridge rather than back to the Basin again. He felt mighty thankful for such luck, that he'd started out on this day, and that he was mounted on such a horse as the blue.

"Now is my chance," he kept a-saying, "now is my chance, and I can't spoil it."

And sure enough, now was his chance, a chance that would hardly ever come his way again.

BUT AS big a chance as it was, there was also many ways of spoiling it. Everything would have to be done just right, and no one realized that any better than Tilden did. He wanted to get the horse in the trap *now*, and he'd have to do considerable figgering and maneuvering to do that.

He couldn't just bust out after the bunch and start chasing 'em towards it, for the black horse would get suspicious then and go some other way in spite of him. No, he'd have to let the horse think he was getting away all the time, and there's where the ticklish work would come in.

His mind was working mighty good now, and one mighty good plan was decided on. His blood was up and his heart was beating mighty furious as he took another look to make sure if the horses was out of sight, and then leading his pack horse he bent low over his saddle and eased down a long draw.

Once in the draw he jogged along at a pretty good gait, for he felt safe of not being seen in there. He wished he didn't have the pack horse to bother with, but he couldn't leave him just yet because that horse would nicker soon as he rode away on the other horse. The black stallion would hear and that'd be more cause for him to get suspicious.

Tilden rode on down the draw for a couple of miles and till he figgered he was well below the bunch of horses. There's where he'd start from, and there's where he'd leave the pack horse. He picked out a stout and shady juniper, tied him there, and took the pack off of him. That pony might come in handy as a relay in case the black stallion turned back to the Basin.

When Tilden came out of the draw he was stripped down for a hard race. It was no trouble for him to locate the bunch again. They'd just grazed on, and now they was right between him and the trap, just where he wanted 'em. He didn't try to hide no more as he rode towards 'em. He wanted the black horse to see him now.

Tilden was near a mile away when the black horse spotted him, and there was no guessing that he had, for there was a commotion in the bunch about then that sure left no doubt. It was like as if a bomb had exploded in the middle of 'em.

Tilden stirred his horse into a lope, so as to be nearer in case the bunch headed the wrong way, but he didn't want to get too near, for he knowed that a wild bunch can be handled easier at a distance than close, and another thing which he figgered on was to try and keep the black horse from leaving the bunch he was with.

The only trouble there was that the bunch he was with might be too slow for the wild horse, but Tilden knowed that if he could keep 'em going fast enough and still keep his distance, the black horse would be apt to stay, and even if he left he'd most likely come back if he wasn't crowded. It'd take a lot of maneuvering, but if the bunch could be used to draw and hold him, it'd save a lot of useless running and there'd be more chance of getting him.

It looked promising too, for, as Tilden rode on, the black stallion didn't seem to want to leave 'em. He'd circled around to start 'em on, and when they finally did, he'd dropped behind 'em and come near half the way back to get a look at the rider, the same as if to make sure it was a rider and that he'd better be going.

He'd bowed his neck as he come, then stopped, whistled and snorted, and, as the rider had kept a-coming, he'd finally turned and hightailed back to the bunch and started hazing 'em on up towards the long juniper ridge, and trap.

The run kept up in great shape for a few miles. Tilden just no more than kept track of 'em in that time and he was mighty hopeful when he seen that the black was staying with the bunch, at the tail end of 'em and keeping 'em going.

The bunch was feeling good and wanting to run, and it wouldn't be no trouble to keep the black horse with 'em so long as they felt that way. But,

Tilden wondered, what about when they had their run out and got a little tired? It'd be some job then to keep the black from hitting out by his lonesome.

THE BUNCH hit a thick patch of junipers, and soon as they went out of sight in there Tilden called on the big blue horse to do his best.

Now was the time to do it, for the bunch couldn't see him come, and then again, it's at such times, when a wild bunch gets out of sight, that they do their best, too. They seem to know that a rider will take advantage of being under cover to ride up on 'em.

But these wasn't wild horses that Tilden was running, only one. And instead of fearing that they'd give him the slip amongst the junipers he was more afraid that they'd stop and go to grazing there. And sure enough, they'd slowed down, and, if it hadn't been for Tilden riding into 'em a-purpose to scare 'em up, they would of stopped to graze.

He spooked 'em up that way twice. And at every little hiding place where they'd be apt to stop again, allowing just enough time for the black horse to be out of sight, he'd swoop down on 'em some more. Then he'd stay back out of sight and keep that way, and no time did he get anything but faraway glimpses of the black horse.

That horse couldn't know the rider was still on his trail, only by the actions of the spooked-up bunch which always caught up with him when he waited. At that, he'd start again, and for a spell he'd haze the bunch the way he was headed till, getting too slow for him, he would leave 'em behind again.

But as long as he seen no more of the rider and being the bunch was never far behind him, he didn't start on at his usual getaway speed, and now he was just ambling along instead of running. Of course he was hitting for his big circle, but that was natural because for the last year or so he'd wanted to range there beyond the tall summit, and this seemed to be the first time his bunch seemed to want to go there with him.

Tilden helped him on that way, and unseen from the black, who always waited at some high spot, he'd stir the gentler range mares to catching up with him. This was a case of where the stallion takes the lead, but in this instance it was the wild horse's nervousness which wouldn't let him drag along at the speed his bunch would set. If these had been as wild as him, some wise mare would of been the leader and the stallion would have been keeping guard from the rear.

But things wasn't going so bad for the black stallion now, even if his bunch did lack a leader, and if it wasn't for them spooking up so often he'd been traveling on a walk and not so much on a trot or lope. But even at that, watching and making distance as he was, it wasn't at all like the times he'd already come up on this trail, hitting out all by his lonesome, and knowing that a rider with a long rope was close to his heels. His bunch had a lot to do in keeping him at ease and from kettling away at that great speed of his.

Tilden worked on and figgered mighty hard to stay out of sight and still keep the bunch a-coming up after the black. And his hard work and figgering wasn't for nothing. He was getting results for it, and pretty soon, after a lot of that, he glimpsed the sight he'd sweated, froze and starved to see.

Less than a mile ahead of him was the black stallion, with the bunch, and going up the lower point of the long juniper ridge. Two miles further on was the trap.

As hard as it was to do, Tilden waited till the bunch got up on the ridge and out of sight. Finally the last rump disappeared over the point of the ridge, and then Tilden left the spot where he'd stood. He kept his horse at a trot and easy lope, for soon now he'd be needing all the speed that horse had in him, and at the gait he was now going he could easy catch up with 'em in time to do the good work.

The bunch was less than half a mile from him when he rode up so just his head showed over the point of the ridge, and they was still going just right. Making sure of that, he skirted along there.

Only short glimpses of the horses did he get from then on, but that was all he wanted. He put his horse in a long lope, and the half a mile between him and the bunch was shortened to a quarter. The trap was now less than a mile away.

Another half a mile, Tilden thought,

and he'd bust in on the bunch for the last run into the trap. They was all going fine and straight for it. And then—all at once the black horse broke loose, like as if a bolt of lightning had shot up from under him. Over the brow of the ridge he went and out of sight.

TILDEN stopped his horse, the like as if another bolt of lightning had struck him in the heart. Then he heard a long, whistling snort from the canyon below, and that of a sudden brought him to life.

The horse had run down there and turned and snorted at whatever scared him off the ridge. And, with the sound of that whistling snort, Tilden knowed that the horse hadn't gone on. There was still hopes, if he acted fast enough.

The hopes came with the bunch of mares that was standing still on top of the ridge. Tilden knowed he couldn't turn the horse back by riding after him, the only chance was to skedaddle the mares the way the stallion went, let him come back to them, and then maybe he'd haze 'em back up on the ridge again before the trap was passed.

So he busted in on the mares and shoved 'em over the edge of the ridge. The mares skedaddled like regular mustangs and fell in on the way the stallion had took like as if they'd been shot along.

Then Tilden pulled up his horse. There was nothing he could do now but wait, for he realized that the worst thing at such a time would be to show himself to the stallion or try to turn him back. That horse would of knowed there was something wrong then and nothing could of got him back but a three-eighths whale line.

It was many long minutes, they seemed like hours, when the sound of a sharp nicker was heard. The black horse was coming back to his bunch. Tilden waited some more, then presently he rode over the edge to look down. No horses was in sight there and no sound of 'em came to his ears. He put his horse on a lope, and staying on the edge of the ridge so he could look down in the canyon he rode up towards the trap.

He hadn't gone far when he seen a sight that chilled him thru, for within a hundred yards of the entrance of the trap was the black stallion and his bunch. They was still in the canyon, and would pass right by the trap, missing the entrance only by two ropes' lengths.

Tilden went into action. There was only one little slim chance left, that he had to see at a glance, and as slim and little as that chance was, he sure wasn't letting it go by. The horses was going along in the canyon on the left side of the trap. Tilden put his horse at top speed and fell in the canyon on the right side.

His intentions was to go around the trap and meet the horses at the point on the other side and scare 'em into turning back. Of course he knowed that there was no way to keep the horses from hightailing it straight back to the Big Basin if he did succeed to turn 'em, but he didn't believe the black horse would want to do that.

He banked on the wisdom of the stallion there, for he figgered if he got at the head of the canyon before the horse did, and showed sudden, that pony would be scared into turning and then hit for a high spot where he could see. The only close high spot there was the ridge.

He sashayed on. The big blue horse carried him around the head of the trap at top speed. The highest point was reached, and then it was all downhill and down the canyon where the horses was coming up in. A glance around showed Tilden they hadn't passed as yet, and he fogged on down that canyon like the devil was after him.

So did the horses when he lit into 'em. They turned tail and forgot which way they wanted to go, they just went. And, as Tilden had figgered, the stallion begin hitting for high ground. That was the ridge.

He was halfway up it and the mares was all close seconds when Tilden pulled a stunt which, to anyone not wise to the wild horse and his ways, would of been thought of as mighty foolish. He'd edged his blue horse in between the bunch and the trap, just exactly as if he wanted 'em down in the canyon and not at all on the ridge.

He had two reasons for doing that. One was that he didn't want the horses to run up against the side of the trap, that would turn 'em from the entrance. The other was that by his acting as tho

he wanted the horses down the canyon, the black horse would get suspicious of that place and never let himself be drove there.

So, Tilden edging in as he did, answered two purposes, and he done it mighty well. Missing the side of the trap, the black horse beat him to the top of the ridge, and the whole bunch, all spooked up, was right close behind him.

THE NEXT thing, now that the horses was on the ridge, was to turn 'em and have 'em head back for the trap again. But Tilden, nor no other man, could of ever figgered a way to do that, not unless he could of transplanted himself on the lead of the bunch and at once, and no rider could ever got the lead on the black horse now.

It looked more than hopeless. But Tilden wasn't for quitting, not even then, and he would follow the black stallion all the way to the Basin if necessary and try to get him back again.

He rode at an angle so as to get the black to crowd him as he had when making the top of the ridge, but the horse wouldn't crowd, he was on top now and his speed would do the rest.

Tilden fogged on after him, half crying at his helplessness, for he seen where, with the speed of that black stallion, all the chance he had now was to see his dust off and on, for a ways.

He was watching him vanish that way and doing his best to keep up when, with a quickness that Tilden himself couldn't account for, not even afterwards, he reined his horse to one side and dropped out of sight over the edge of the ridge.

The black stallion had turned, the whole bunch had turned with him in a flash, and all was coming up the long ridge again at the same speed they'd started down.

They stampeded past where Tilden was hid and straight on towards the trap. Tilden didn't stop to wonder about the change of events, not just then. He fell in right behind 'em instead, stirred his horse to his best, and a couple of minutes later, the black stud away in the lead and the rest of the bunch doing their best to follow, filed on thru the entrance trap.

VIII

THERE was no moon a-shining that night. It was dark, mighty dark, and that's why, when the last light of day went on to other worlds, Tilden stirred and started to walk away. He couldn't see no more in this darkness, no more till the light of a new day came up again, and now he'd have to rest his eyes till then.

But his eyes wasn't tired, for they'd really only been feasting, feasting on the black stallion. He'd really caught that horse at last. Now he had him, and where there wasn't the least chance for him to get away, but it was hard to believe.

And to make sure that he'd still have him as proof for the next morning, he had run him and the bunch in the small corral and roped the gate tight. A mouse could hardly crawl thru that corral and even a herd of stamping buffalo couldn't of pushed it over.

The night's ride back to his pack outfit was no strain on him. His heart was too full of what it'd hungered for, and it was pounding strong. Of course, he thought as he rode, he'd played in luck some, because what was it but luck that'd made the black horse turn back up there on the ridge?

But as he rode back early the next morning, leading the pack horse, he seen what had been the cause of the black turning back. It had been the same thing that'd turned him off the ridge in the first place. So instead of luck being with Tilden it really had been against him, and it was only thru his hard riding and figgering that he'd won out.

What he seen up there on the ridge, and plumb acrost it, was a streak of black coals. Dry junipers had been stacked and burned there, and for reason only to turn the black horse off the ridge and away from the trap. That had been somebody's work, somebody who wanted to queer him in getting the horse, and Tilden had a strong hunch who that somebody might be.

But, as Tilden rode on over 'em, he held no hard feelings against whoever done that trick. That was just another proof that he could win in spite of odds, another feather in his cap, and making the winning all the more worth while.

He rode on and by the trap. The

black horse and his bunch was still there in the small corral. Taking care of him was going to be quite a problem, he thought. He could of course take the horse to Old Joe's place by breaking him to lead a little and then tying the rope around the pack horse's neck. He couldn't run away that way and the pack horse would sure take him on in.

He could be well took care of there in one of the high corrals. There was plenty of good hay and grain and there'd be no need of rustling feed for him. But Tilden didn't want to take the black to Old Joe's place. Not yet, not till he had him broke to ride. Then, setting on him, he'd ride up there and surprise that old boy.

But there was a lot to do yet before that time come, and a ticklish part of it was started on soon as Tilden was thru straightening up his camp by the spring. He took his rope off the saddle, picked up a hackamore, and started towards the corral. The bunch jammed on one side as he came near and he was greeted by the stallion's loud whistling snort.

Tilden's intentions was to step in the corral, simply rope the black by the front feet, throw him, slip the hackamore on his head, and tie him up while he let the other horses out to go back to their range. But as he started to climb over the corral he found that stepping inside wouldn't be so safe.

The black had a look in his eye that hinted to anything but a welcome, and the way he worked his ears would of warned even the most ignorant.

Tilden stayed perched on top of the high corral, and studying the horse, he wondered how he ever caught him, and now if he ever would be able to break him. The battle was only half won, seemed like, and now the real fighting was about to begin. But there was one thing about this half of the battle, he now had something to fight with.

YET HOW he did hate the thought of starting in. Starting in meant a choking loop around that slick neck and, for a time, marring the velvet of his hide. The horse would fight, skin himself here and there against the corral, and a dead fear would be in his heart for many, many days.

He thought some of letting the horse go. He'd won in what he'd set out to do, and now he was only taking his freedom away. But when he thought of that freedom, with other riders always after him, sooner or later to be caught again, and all, he felt that he could give him a better chance, and the horse would be as free as possible again, once his confidence was won.

Tilden looked at him and shook his head. "Too bad, little horse," he says. In his hands was the rope, a little loop was hanging on the inside of the corral, and then without warning, that little loop split the air and sailed over the black stallion's head.

The bunch spooked at the hissing sound of the loop, and Tilden braced himself while taking a couple of turns around a stout juniper post, but, to his surprise, no jolt come, and when he looked at the black after making sure his rope was well fast, he seen the black standing there, still, and watching him, like as if he'd never knowed a loop had slipped around his neck.

Without ever tightening the slack on the loop around his neck, the horse stood watching him. Then, all at once, that good-looking head of his was transformed to look like one of these dragons that's seen in pictures. The glimpse Tilden got of his mouth and eyes and nostrils more than reminded him of one, and the only difference was there was no flame or smoke out of neither the mouth nor nostrils.

But the look was sure there, and as that head appeared above the nine-foot fence at him and the weight of his body shook the whole corral, Tilden didn't want to see more. He just made sure he fell off on the outside, and when he hit the ground the front of his shirt was missing.

He sat where he was for a spell sort of dazed, and once he shivered, for he could still see that head a-glaring at him. It had been quite a surprise and a shock. This horse he'd admired and wanted so, and which he'd planned to do so much for, had turned on him as tho he'd been his worst enemy.

That was a disappointment that could be healed only by handing back the same that'd been handed him. But he was mighty careful as he stuck his head over the corral a second time, and then it was only for a second. He just wanted to make sure the rope was fastened so it'd hold. Then, after a

glance at the black, he came down again. That glance told him plain that he was still being challenged.

That was well for Tilden in a way, and the way he felt at that time. He would call him on that and start in right now. He didn't feel sorry for the horse as he went around the corral and with intentions to open the gate and turn the mares loose, and all he worried about as he went to do that was to see that the stallion was still fastened and couldn't break away.

But if the stallion was anyways fretful about his mares leaving him, he sure didn't show it. He fought the rope and tried to break away, but all he had eyes for as he done that was Tilden, and as disappointed and peeved as that boy still was, he was mighty glad that the rope holding that black horse was new and mighty strong, and glad again to close the gate when the last mare had run out.

Feeling pretty hurt at the horse's actions towards him, Tilden didn't care for the time what happened to him. He knowed there was danger of the horse choking himself, there was a tightening loop around his neck, and the other end of the rope was tied hard and fast with two half hitches around the top of the heavy corral post, but he wasn't worried any of that happening.

The horse fought the rope, pawed and bit at it and tried his best to break loose, but the rope held and his fighting only went to tighten the loop around his neck. His breath was coming short, and then he begin to sway back and forth, to fall flat on his side, choking.

It wasn't till then that Tilden got into action, but when he did he wasn't at all slow. He kind of flew over into the corral, up the post the rope was fastened to and loosened up the half hitches, and then, before the horse could stir again, he'd fell on his neck, grabbed one ear, held up his nose and slipped on the hackamore.

When the horse got up again, feeling kind of shaky, he was tied solid once more, but there was no choking loop holding him this time.

TILDEN, in a man's way, was now figgering on how to handle the horse, how to get the best of him, and have him in some way so he would stand the touch of his hand. But first, and the main thing now, a credit to some of the breed that's man, was to get feed and water for him.

Tilden eased out of the corral, went to his camp, took one of the paniers from his pack outfit and went to looking for grass to fill it with. It took him over an hour to do that, and when he came back to the corral with the grass, and throwed it over the fence, the horse only reared and pawed at it. Tilden wasn't surprised that the horse wouldn't touch the grass, he figgered it'd be a day or two before he'd even sniff at it.

But, anyway, he felt better to have some there for him, and now the next problem was to get water to him. He spent over half the day at digging a little ditch from the spring to the corral. An old shovel which he'd used while building the trap the year before came in mighty handy, and he was pleased to at last see the water run into a little pool at one edge of the corral.

The horse never let on that he seen the water or cared for any of it. And while Tilden worked in the corral, making the little pool, he had eyes only for him. By now he'd quit fighting the rope that held him, and he stood like always, waiting.

Tilden then went on the outside of the corral and loosened up the rope a few feet so the horse could reach the water. But never a move did he make, and only his eyes followed the man. If he drank it was during the night, but never while Tilden was anywheres near, and the grass hadn't been touched. His pride wouldn't allow him to touch anything man gave him.

It was with a sorry feeling that Tilden noticed the gaunted look of the horse the next morning, and once more he thought of turning him loose, and again decided not to. He'd first try and win that horse's confidence and trust.

Tilden worked hard that day, cutting many strong juniper posts and bringing them in the corral, where he made a small chute, or narrow stall, at one side of it. Each post was put in the ground about two feet deep and close to one another. The posts stuck up above four feet, and at the head of the stall was a manger and a stout post to tie to.

It was high noon the next day before the stall was done, and up till that time, all the while Tilden worked in the

corral, the horse had stood like a statue, still ignoring the fresh grass that'd been brought him. Something would have to be done or, as Tilden figgered, that horse would starve himself to death.

Maybe it'd be best if he stayed away for a while, he decided, and give the horse a chance to forget him and to notice the grass hay that was at his feet. Then, as he built a manger on the stall, he thought of another thing.

If there was a little box on that manger, and a little grain in it, maybe the horse would get to nibbling at it in time. Of course he knowed that grain is a mighty strange thing to a wild horse, but once one of the breed gets to tasting it, a little handful once in a while goes a long ways towards gentling even the wildest.

So while Tilden thought it'd be best to stay away from the horse for a spell, he'd figgered it a good time to hightail it to Old Joe's place and get a couple of sacks of the grain.

By noon the next day he was back again, and not only with grain, but he'd brought a box to put it in at the manger, and then he'd raided Old Joe's storeroom for all he'd need to last him three weeks or a month.

All was fine when he got back, the horse was still in the corral, and the fact that he was much alive as yet was proved by the whistling snort that greeted him as he rode towards the corral. Some of the grass hay was miss- and there was no sign of the lockjaw taking holt on the horse, so it was plain to see by that that he'd been eating and drinking.

But his fighting spirit was still all there. That Tilden seen when he reached with a stick to get the rope that afternoon. It was a good thing, once again, that there was a strong corral fence between him and the horse. But tomorrow, Tilden thought, as he dodged away, there might be a difference in that spirit. It might get to reason and understand once he got the horse in the stall and where he couldn't do no harm.

He drawed the rope up to a strong post and tied the horse so he could also go in that corral, and then he finished his work on the manger. He nailed the little box to it, put some grain in there, and then seeing that all was ready, he went out and untied the rope again.

He pulled out a fresh supply of grass, throwed it over into the corral, and seen the horse glare thru the fence at him. He smiled, like in sympathy, then he says:

"Starting tomorrow, old boy, we're going to get acquainted, and if you will give me the chance, I'll show you how much I want to be your friend."

IX

THE SUN was just peeping over the ridges when the hated man showed himself at the corral. In his hands was more of these snakelike coils which had proved useless to fight against. To the horse, these coils was as the man's touch, always holding, and cutting to the heart.

The man didn't come inside of the corral. He worked his coils from the outside, and the horse watched him reach for the rope he was dragging. That rope wasn't fastened to the top of the tall post that morning, it was switched over to the other side of the corral instead and slipped around another post at the head of the narrow and suspicious-looking enclosure.

Slow and easy the horse's head was turned towards that. He felt a pull then, a steady pull, and wanting to relieve the pressure against his neck he took one step and another towards the narrow place.

But he was quite a ways away from it yet, and he could take them few steps without getting too close to the thing. Then, when the pressure of the rope was still on his neck and he feared to make another step, was when the man appeared in the corral.

The horse, in surprise, jumped forward and when he tried to jump back he found that, as usual, the rope held him there. The man was behind him holding one end of it, and then another bunch of coils appeared and part of 'em settled on his rump in a loop.

The black horse fought. He wanted to fight the man, but the ropes was part of him, it seemed like. So, not being able to get to the man, he fought them. He struck and kicked at all of them that was around him, but always.

with every bit of slack he gave as he fought, he felt himself drawed towards the narrow place.

And then, as he found himself near inside of it, he made a desperate jump like as if to clear it and the corral all at once. But he no more than got halfways up when his head was pulled down, and the first thing he knowed he was right inside the narrow place and his head was pegged down so he could hardly move,

And that wasn't all. A half a second later heavy timber came up behind him and held him there. He couldn't even pull back then, and he couldn't jump out of the enclosure either, because as he tried that he felt a rope just back of his withers and which held him right where he was.

Wild-eyed, he chewed at the heavy timbers and ropes. His body was covered with sweat and his every muscle was a-quivering. And there, not over ten yards from him, was the man.

But the man, Tilden, wasn't grinning. Instead, he felt mighty concerned at the way the horse carried on, and, realizing the fear and hopelessness that was in that pony's heart, he kept away from him, knowing that his coming near would only make him more desperate.

For that reason too, he stayed away from the horse all the rest of the day, busying himself about the camp, and doing little odd jobs which all he'd neglected ever since he'd caught the horse. He didn't want to think about the horse nor what that pony was going thru just then, and being busy would be good medicine against that.

He was in the thick of such work when a surprising sound, awful near, made him turn. It was a voice, a clear, tuneful voice, and it'd said, "Hello, stranger!"

And there was Rita Spencer setting on her horse.

"I guess I wasn't expected," she says smiling, "but I seen the smoke of your fire, and I wanted to find out if it was you camped here."

"Yeh," says Tilden. "Won't you get down from your horse? I'll tie him up for you."

"He won't need tying, thanks, and I don't think I should stay to talk to you at all. Not since you make such a stranger of yourself."

"Why, I didn't know I had," Tilden stuttered. "I didn't—"

"But you did," she interrupted. "You haven't been over to visit us since early last fall. That's nearly seven months ago."

Tilden was surprised. "The last time I went over to see you," he says, "you weren't home."

"Yes, Moran told me about that. He said you didn't have the time to wait, and I was sorry to 've missed you. But you couldn't guess where I was that day. I climbed up on the flat-topped butte and to see if you had moved to the Basin."

"And you wasn't playing that you wasn't at home then?"

The girl stared. "Why, what makes you say that?"

THERE was nothing for Tilden to do but go on. "Well," he says, "I was afraid that I may have been pestering you. You see," he hurried on, "there's so little to me, and I couldn't see where my company could be tolerated only thru sympathy for my uselessness. I don't want—"

"Are you talking seriously, Mr. Tilden?" The girl got down off her horse and, coming a little closer, pointed a finger at him. "Just for that," she says, "I'm going to make you take me home, and you're going to stay for supper when you get there."

So they rode over to Miss Rita's home. At supper there was some talk about the black stallion, and Rita and her father passed their opinion on how doubtful it would be for any man to ever be able to catch him.

Tilden's secret was still a secret, and when he came back to his camp that night and tended to the horse, he felt mighty pleased at the thought of surprising another party, a party even more important than Old Joe, by some day straddling the stallion and riding him up in plain sight.

Them visions done a whole lot to cause cheerful whistling tunes to be heard at the trap corral the next morning. The black stallion fought some more when he was hazed into the narrow stall, but that morning Tilden hardly seemed to notice the fiery look that was in that pony's eyes. He put him thru the ropes like it was all in the day's work, and it wasn't till the horse was in

the stall to stay that he gave a thought to what all was ahead.

There was a lot ahead yet, a lot to be considered in handling that horse, and the way it was starting it looked like the horse would eddicate the man as much as the man would eddicate the horse. Tilden left him alone in the stall all that forenoon. He wanted him to get used to that, and it was in the middle of the afternoon before he came in the corral and begin to get close.

Stepping slow and careful, he eased towards the horse. He talked a bit and whistled low, and as he came nearer he gradually raised a hand, for with a few more steps he'd be able to touch him. The hand kept a-getting nearer till finally it touched the horse's quivering side.

"Steady, boy," Tilden was saying over and over again, and he kept his hand on the horse's side as he talked. After a while he moved the hand, and in rubbing motion brought it nearer the whithers.

The horse tried to bite him then, but his head was tied short and all he could do was try. Tilden never seemed to notice the action, the withers was passed over, and fingers was run thru the long strands of the black mane. And all the while the horse quivered and crouched and fought.

Tilden went from one side of the horse that way to the other and back and forth. Sometimes he'd leave him a few minutes to sort of give him a chance to think things over and when he'd come back again the hand would always feel the same quivering hide. It didn't seem that the horse would ever get used to the touch of the human hand, for when late afternoon come there was no sign of any change.

Two days went by. The horse got a little quieter and didn't flinch so much after the hand had once touched him, but that little amount of quietness was replaced by a waiting look on that pony's head which Tilden didn't like. Meanwhile, though, he'd started to chew some grain.

At first he'd chewed it just to be chewing something, in the place of a stick or a post or anything. But one time after that Tilden seen him stick his nose in the manger and chew on some more of the grain when he wasn't peeved. Then one noon, when he'd left the horse to go cook a bait for himself, he seen on his return the box was empty.

Tilden put a little more grain in the box. The horse ignored it then, but the next morning the box was empty again. The horse had come up to the manger of his own accord during the night to get that grain, a proof that the stall had got to be less feared. The sight of the empty grain box stirred Tilden's hopes up a considerable.

The horse kept on fighting the touch of Tilden's hand, but every morning the grain was missing, the box kept on being empty. And then one night Tilden didn't put no grain in the box. He missed doing that agin the next night. And when he rattled the grain in a pan the next day the black stallion perked up his ears and nickered.

IT WASN'T many days later that Tilden could run his hand along that pony's neck without him flinching. That pony had got to looking for his grain by then, and as Tilden kept feeding him little handfuls now and again, he'd got so he didn't seem to mind being in the narrow stall or having a hand touch him. [*Turn page*]

Message from Garcia

Texas Artist Tells Why It's Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.

Gradually, the murderous look begin to disappear, and instead of being greeted by snorts Tilden was now nickered at, like as if he was welcome. Tilden was winning, slow but sure enough winning.

One day Tilden came in the corral packing a saddle. There was some more commotion as that rig was brought close, and more fighting to break out of the stall. But Tilden didn't rush things, he let the saddle lay to within sniffing distance of the horse all that forenoon and it wasn't till the sun had passed the highest point that he began to ease it up on his back.

There was more flinching and quivering as that was done, but Tilden noticed with a glad feeling that no bad look showed in the pony's eyes. He put the saddle on, let it rest there a spell till the horse got used to it a little, and then took it off again, and put it on some more till, with a little handful of grain being handed out once in a while thru that performance, the horse finally got to accept that tool, in a neutral way.

The saddle was slipped on again the next day, and clinched up, and then Tilden sat up on it, stuck his feet in the stirrups and worked 'em back and forth. There was more muscle quivering and flinching but it wasn't for long this time, for with Tilden's talking, which sounds the horse had got to perking his ears at, and with more handfuls of grain and so on, that all had got to fit in with the man's doings. And it was getting so that that man's doings didn't call no more on that fighting instinct of his.

This training went on that way for many days, like as if preparing for a big event. And a big event it would be, that day when the man and horse lined out *together*.

FINALLY that day come. The entrance of the trap was opened wide, and they started away, neither seeming to be of the earth. The horse took on with the spirit of the man, and at that time that man's spirit was more with wings and not so much steps. The black flowing mane of the horse was as the plumes of a powerful bird that was taking him to the high point of his goal, and when the Spencer ranch was reached, there on the porch, and like as if in tune to make that day's happenings perfect, was Rita.

"Bert," she cried, "you're wonderful!"

She'd jumped down off the porch, a regular apparition of joy, and she seemed about to want to try and hug both the man and the horse right there on the spot.

Tilden's thoughts was soaring sky-high about then, away up amongst the heavens, and it looked like they was due to soar on and on up there. For as he dismounted and came to her, he seen, mixed in with the proud light in her eyes, man's biggest reward, love.

Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis Are Heading This Way

In

THE FEATHERED SOMBRERO

By NORMAN A. FOX

•

ONE OF NEXT ISSUE'S THREE FEATURED TOP-FLIGHT NOVELS!

Gordon lunged at Quayle and caught him in a flying tackle

It Pays to be a Rancher

By DONALD HOBART

JIM GORDON sat with his back against a big boulder, hate in his eyes. He was a big, dark haired young man dressed in range clothes. His wrists were tightly tied behind his back. His gunbelt and holster containing his Colt were gone now. Pete Quayle had taken them, as he had taken everything else Gordon and his partner possessed.

"I'll kill Quayle if it is the last thing I do," Gordon said softly, bitterly. "There's a man who deserves to die."

Lem Harrell turned his head and looked at Gordon. Harrell's wrists were also tied and he, likewise was stretched out with his back resting against a rock. He was older than Jim Gordon, and a good man to have siding you

Jim Gordon Finds that Outlaws Come in Threes!

when you were in trouble.

"Don't talk about it, Jim," Harrell said. "It might give Quayle ideas about downing us in a hurry. You know how he can sneak up on a man without making a sound. He might be listening now."

"You're right," Gordon said, and again lapsed into silence.

It had grown dark now, and there was no sound save the murmur of the water in the creek not more than twenty feet from the rocks, and the rustling of the brush and trees as an east wind rose.

Gordon found himself thinking of the ranch that he and Lem Harrell owned as partners. It was a good little spread, and their brand was the Spade, for as Lem had said it would take a lot of digging in and working to make the place pay.

They had been riding back from the nearest town five miles over south when a big, hard looking man with thick bushy hair had stepped out onto the road, covering them with a gun and demanding they hand over the money. Since Gordon had four dollars and some change in his pockets and Harrell about ten they couldn't understand the reason for the holdup. The man with the gun had been Pete Quayle, though they hadn't learned that until later.

"Shell out," Quayle had said. "Hand over the dinero."

Gordon and Harrell had handed the big man all the money they had with them. Quayle had taken it, and then cursed.

"Never mind this small stuff," he growled. "I want the big money. Hand it over!"

Gordon had protested, stating that was all the money they had and his partner had backed him up. At gun point Quayle had forced them to dismount, and then, before they had been aware of the big man's intention he had knocked them both out with his gun barrel.

THEY had regained consciousness to find they were lying near the boulders—their wrists fastened behind them. Their gunbelts and their horses were gone, but Quayle was there watching them.

"So you finally came out of it," the big man said. "When I hit a man with a gun barrel I don't fool about it. Not Pete Quayle. You haven't got the money on you for I searched you when I tied you up—but it is around somewhere and I'm going to get it."

He hurried away, disappearing in the brush before they could protest, or even ask questions. Now he had been gone nearly an hour, and Gordon and Harrell were waiting for the big man's return.

"I still can't figure what money he is talking about," Gordon said after an interval of silence. He had been rubbing the ropes that held his wrists against a rough edge of the boulder behind him, hoping to wear the strands through, but so far hadn't had much success. "You got any ideas about the money, Lem?"

"Can't think of any," Harrell said. "It don't make sense to me."

Quayle silently reappeared. He walked over and stood glaring down at his prisoners.

"Thought maybe you two hid the money over at your ranch," he said. "But I searched the place right good and couldn't find it anywhere. There's ways of making men talk though."

"What money do you mean, Quayle?" Gordon asked.

"The money you two stole from the bank over at Twin Oaks yesterday," Quayle said. "Course you both were masked then, but I recognized you. Even trailed you as far as the Spade last night."

"You're crazy," Gordon said impatiently. "We didn't rob any bank and we haven't been near Twin Oaks in weeks—that town is nearly fifteen miles north of here."

"If we wore masks, how could you recognize us?" Harrell demanded.

"Well, I wasn't quite shore about you two until I trailed you to your ranch last night," Quayle said. "Then when I saw you unsaddle your horses and turn them into the corral, and go into the house carrying a couple of money bags I was plumb certain of it."

Gordon started to tell Quayle that they had not been home the previous night. They had remained in the town of Shallow Creek over night, then he decided against it. Gordon was sure the big man would not believe him anyway.

"So we've gone in for bank robbery now," Harrell said. "How much did we get, Quayle?"

"I don't know," Quayle said. "But I want the money. I'm sick of this part of the country anyway. I figure on taking that dinero and getting as far away from here as possible."

Gordon was still sawing the rope that bound his wrists against the rough edge of the rock behind him. He felt a strand give way and kept on sawing.

"Anyone else suspect us of being the bank robbers?" Gordon asked.

"Don't know and don't care," Quayle said. "I know it and that is all that matters to me." The big man drew his gun. "I'm a right good shot. Reckon if I put some bullets close enough to you, then you'll start talking and tell where you hid the money."

Another strand of the ropes that held Gordon's wrists parted. Quayle carefully aimed his gun and fired a shot into the ground. It just missed Harrell's right leg by inches.

"You two better start talking," Quayle said grimly. "I might happen to miss!"

He aimed and fired again and this time the bullet buzzed by Gordon's head from an angle and thudded into a tree trunk behind the boulder.

"We can't tell you what we don't know," Gordon said. "We didn't rob any banks. Quayle."

"Talk!" Quayle put a third shot close to Harrell's body. "Where is the money?"

"I don't know," Harrell said, and cursed the big man.

Gordon felt the ropes part. His wrists and hands were free, but he remained there with his back against the rock—waiting.

QUAYLE fired a fourth shot. This came so close that it burned Gordon's left leg.

"Talk!" shouted Quayle in wild anger. "I want that dinero!"

He fired the fifth shot at Harrell that missed by inches, and a sixth at Gordon that knocked chips from the boulder. Then suddenly Gordon leaped to his feet.

"Stay back or I'll kill you!" Quayle shouted.

"The gun is empty, Quayle," Gordon said. "You used up all the bullets!"

He lunged at the big man and caught Quayle in a flying tackle. The gun flew out of Quayle's hand. The two men landed in the shallow waters of the creek with a loud splash. Gordon got a grip on the big man's throat and held on tightly. Quayle was kicking and struggling, lashing out with hands and feet. Gordon released his grip and the two men struggled to their feet, dripping wet. They waded back on the creek bank, for their first thought was to get out of the water.

Gordon saw that Quayle's gun had dropped on dry ground. He quickly grabbed it up, whirled and hit the big man over the head with the gun barrel. Quayle's knees buckled and he dropped to the ground unconscious. Harrell uttered a loud cheer as he watched.

"We owed him that, Jim," Harrell said.

"I'll say we did," Gordon agreed.

He unfastened the unconscious man's gunbelt and strapped it around his own waist, then swiftly reloaded the empty gun and thrust it into the holster. Harrell sat up and his wrists were untied. Evidently he had been sawing his bonds on the rock behind him just as Gordon had done.

"We're taking Quayle back to the ranch a prisoner," Gordon said as his partner got to his feet. "Get those ropes he had us tied with, splice them together and we'll tie him with them, Lem."

Harrell got the ropes and spliced them together and then they rolled the big man over and tied his wrists behind his back. They made sure there was no chance of his breaking the ropes. When they had finished, Quayle moaned and opened his eyes. Then he rolled over and sat up.

"What hit me?" he demanded dazedly.

"A gun barrel," Gordon said coldly, drawing the gun out of the holster. "Get up, make it fast or I'll see how close I can come to you with bullets."

Quayle scrambled awkwardly to his feet, for his hands being tied behind him made it a bit difficult. He looked anxiously at the gun in Gordon's hand. Obviously the big man wasn't so tough when he was the prisoner.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked.

"Take you to our ranch and decide what to do with you after that," Gordon said. "Start walking."

"We don't need to walk," Quayle said. "Your horses and mine are hidden back in the brush a little way from here. I'll lead you to them."

"Go ahead," Gordon said. "We'll be right behind you."

Quayle headed away from the clearing at the edge of the creek. The east wind was still blowing, and the night was dark. It didn't take them long to reach the horses. The owners of the Spade found their gunbelts hanging on their saddle horns. Harrell quickly got his belt and fastened it on. He examined his gun to make sure it was loaded, and then dropped it back into the holster.

"I feel better now," Harrell said.

"How do you expect me to climb into the saddle with my hands tied behind my back?" Quayle demanded.

"Don't you worry your aching head about it," Gordon said. "Come on, Lem. We'll give him a boost."

They boosted the big man up into the saddle as Quayle put one foot in the stirrup. Then Gordon mounted his own horse and Harrell handed him the reins of the big man's bay. Harrell swung into the saddle on his roan and they headed for the ranch with Gordon leading the prisoner's horse by the reins. Since he was wearing Quayle's gun, Gordon left his gunbelt hanging on the saddle horn.

THE ranch was in darkness when they reached it. Gordon and Harrell did all the work on the Spade themselves and had no regular cowhands. They planned on hiring a few cowboys when they had enough stock to make it necessary.

While Gordon guarded the prisoner Harrell unsaddled all three horses and turned them into the cavvy corral, and placed the gear in the harness shed. When they had finished and had reached the ranchhouse, Gordon suddenly halted, and stood listening.

"Riders coming this way," he said. "Duck out of sight here in the shadows at the side of the house. If you make any noise I'll knock you over the head again with this gun-barrel, Quayle."

"I ain't that big a fool," Quayle said.

They waited and in a few minutes two horsemen rode toward the ranchhouse as though they owned the place.

"Looks like this spread is still deserted," one of the riders said loudly enough for the three men to hear him as they remained hidden in the shadows. "That was a smart trick we pulled last night, Joe. With the sheriff's posse so close on our trail, we had to get rid of that bank money fast."

"That's right, Dan," said the other horseman. "So we rode right in here like the ranch belonged to us, turned out horses into the corral and spent the night here."

"Sure would have been trouble if the real owner had showed up," said Dan. "We would have had to down him. Reckon you were right this morning about not leaving here with the money in daylight. Wonder if it is still in the bucket down in the well?"

"If only I had been thirsty!" Quayle said loudly.

The two bank robbers cursed and grabbed for their guns. They had them half drawn when Gordon shot the nearest man in the right arm, and Harrell put a bullet in the other bank robber's shoulder.

"Light down," Gordon snapped, rushing forward and grabbing the reins of the bandits' horses before the wounded men could try to ride away. "My partner has you covered."

The two bank robbers swung out of their saddles, moaning in pain. There was the sound of more hoofbeats and then the sheriff and a posse rode in. Gordon and Harrell knew Sheriff John Adams and some of the other men in the posse.

"So you got the bank robbers," Adams said as he sized up the situation. "They fooled us last night. When we saw them ride in here and turn their horses into the corral I was sure it was you two coming home and not the men we were after so we went looking to see if we couldn't find the bank robbers somewhere else."

"What brought you back here tonight, Sheriff?" Gordon asked.

"Learned that you two had spent the night in town last night," said the sheriff. "That made me realize how we had been fooled. Rode out to see if by any chance the bank robbers were still hanging around this ranch. We were lucky." Adams glanced at Quayle and saw the big man's hands were tied behind his back. "So you got Quayle, too."

"You know him?" Gordon asked in surprise.

"I do," said Sheriff Adams. "There is a five thousand dollar reward for his capture. He murdered a rancher and robbed his home over east of here about a week ago. The rancher lived

long enough to identify the man who did it. Quayle only got fifty dollars out of that job."

Gordon told the sheriff where the bandits had hidden the money they had stolen. The well bucket was hauled up with the money bags tied to it. The well was dry and hadn't been used in years. Gordon and Harrell had considered putting it back into working condition, but hadn't done so as yet.

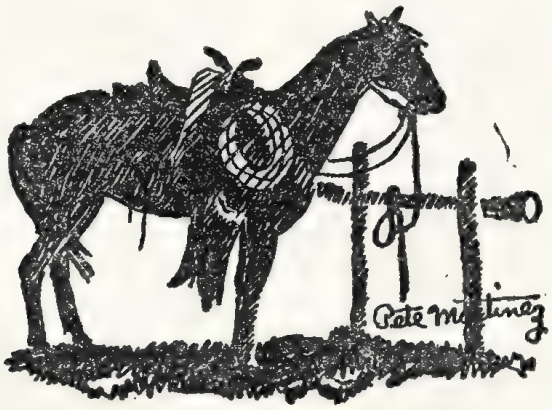
"With the reward the bank has offered for the capture of the robbers and the reward for getting Pete Quayle, you two are doing all right," the sheriff said as he and the posse got ready to take the prisoners away. "Reckon you'll get six or seven thousand dollars."

"Thanks, Quayle." Gordon grinned at the big man. "When it comes to finding money you're really a big help!"

Pete Quayle cursed bitterly as the posse took him and the two bank robbers away.

When the two partners were alone Gordon grinned at Harrell.

"I'm hungry," he said. "Let's get something to eat, Lem. You know, I'm beginning to think it pays to be a rancher!"



The Self-Returning Horse

By TEX GAINSVILLE

TRANSPORTATION methods in the old west ran the gamut from plush-lined private railroad cars to one-man-power snowshoes. But one of the most typically western vehicles was the self-returning horse which was apparently developed and trained in mining towns.

Miners in town who wanted to get back to their claims, rented a horse at the livery stable, rode the animals to their destination and then turned them loose with the reins tied to the saddle horn. The conditioned broncs made their own way back to the stable.

Of course this was not entirely a new device. Even in the east, livery stable horses for years had been trained to go home. Many a driverless buggy spun through the streets while its faithful steed, unpiloted, kept his own eye alert for traffic hazards.

But the west, as always, put its own wrinkle into the practice.

In the first place, a western horse was never as docile as its eastern cousin. For example, a pedestrian, observing one of these self-returning horses going back to the stable might try to catch one and grab himself a free ride. But not so. The wily cayuse, knowing that the hitch-hiker hadn't paid the tariff, would become as elusive as a jack-rabbit, bolt and show his heels to the sponger.

Some of the horses were as individual and cantankerous as the inmates of an old man's home. The story is told of one horse who hated to carry anything in a gunny sack on his back. He might permit himself to be loaded at the stable, where there were strong arms to enforce the rules; but once safely out of sight, he turned into a bucking tornado and got rid of both gunny sack and passenger.

The hostlers promptly worked out a wrinkle to profit themselves. If a miner showed up a little worse for a spree, with a jug which he was taking home for solace, they took extra good care of him. They put the jug in a sack, but tied it firmly to the saddle. When the horse got away from the stable and started to buck, he got rid of the rider easily, but the tied-on sack stayed with him. Then the horse went back to the stable and the boys were richer for one jug that cheers.

If, by any chance, the miner found his way back and complained about his jug, they told him it had bounced off on the way back and they'd never seen it. Jug insurance, unfortunately, was unknown in that day.

A Frontier Novel

THE GOLD

I

IN FRONT of the long adobe station a man waited, eyes turned to the west. His hand rested on the back of a spirited chestnut horse. Byers was small and wiry, hard as nails. He wasted no energy in useless protest, but the fat station keeper knew he was seething with impatience.

The wrangler holding a second saddled horse knew it, too. For the pony express rider from Carson was late and his delay was keeping Byers from start-

by WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

The McClintocks ride into booming Nevada to stake their claims—and stick around for some six-gun palaver with renegades!

The red-headed man stumbled and pitched forward as the big ruffian continued shooting at him (Chap. II)

TRAIL

ing on the next lap of the transcontinental journey.

"Wonder what's holdin' Tim," the stableman remarked.

"He ain't been late before in a blue moon," commented the fat station keep-

er, and commenced to sing lugubriously and tunelessly:

Old Grimes is dead, that good old man,
We ne'er shall see him more.

Byers said nothing.

The pony express was a triumph of American pluck and energy. It stretched from St. Joseph to San Francisco, two thousand miles through the heart of the Indian country. Between the Missouri and Sacramento the time-table called for ten days, but often the mail pouches moved two hundred miles toward their destination in twenty-four hours. And not to be ahead of schedule was contrary to the tradition of the service.

"Tim's sure late," the wrangler repeated.

"Kid McClintock's early. Hour ahead of time," the station keeper replied.

Far away to the east a small cloud of dust rose from the sage and greasewood. Almost at the same time a second billow of yellow alkali appeared in the sunset glow of the horizon.

The fat man grumbled. "Hell's hinges! That accident to Meighan is liable to shoot the whole schedule up. Tim'il have to double back to Carson in his place. I'll have him dig us up another man there."

THE rider from the east arrived at the station first. He pulled up beside the wrangler, leaped to the ground. Two minutes was allowed for the change of sacks from one horse to another. The messenger, a long lean boy, swept the pouches deftly from one saddle to the other. "Where's Meighan?" he asked.

"Done bust his laig. Tim Keefe will have to take his run tonight."

"Where's Tim?"

"Not in yet. There's his dust." The station keeper waved a fat hand toward the sunset.

Byers had been watching intently the dust cloud. "Something's wrong," he said.

Hugh McClintock looked. The approaching horse was weaving from side to side. Instead of a rider, a sack seemed to be prone in the saddle.

McClintock ran forward and caught the bridle. The sack was a man who had been clinging feebly to the mane of the bay. He groaned as he slid from the saddle.

"Piutes—this side the Silver Mountains," he whispered. An arrow head, deeply imbedded, projected from the flesh back of the shoulder.

The mails had to go through without delay. Byers transferred the pouches to his own saddle, swung on, and galloped into the desert.

Kid McClintock rose. He, too, must be on his way, for there was nobody else to carry the mail to Carson City.

"I'll be movin'," he said.

"Looks like you're elected," agreed the fat man. "Not much use wishin' advice on you. Injuns may be anywhere. But I reckon maybe you better swing to the south and hit the Walker River range. They're liable to be watchin' the trail."

The boy moved to the fresh horse, spurs dragging and jingling. He had done his day's work. But the mail had to go through. McClintock shot westward in a cloud of dust. Half a mile from the station he swung sharply to the south.

PLACERVILLE was busy as a hive of bees. Men bought and sold hurriedly. A hundred outfits were being roped up to cross the Sierras to the Carson Valley. Ox teams swung into town and out again with goods. Everywhere was that orderly confusion of humanity moving to a common end. That common end was Washoe, as Nevada was then called, and the silver diggings at the foot of Mt. Davidson. Such rich grounds never had been seen before. Hurray for Washoe! Hip hip for the land of dreams! Washoe or bust!

A canvas-covered emigrant wagon drawn by a pair of emaciated horses moved slowly toward the hills. The driver was a bullet-headed young fellow with sullen, close-set eyes. At the crest of the first rise he turned in his seat and looked back. "Good-by, Hangtown," he shouted with an oath, shaking his ragged whip at Placerville.

The skeleton horses crept up the road toward the mountains. Later in the day

the prairie schooner came into a region where patches of snow began to appear in the hill crotches. The occupants—the man, a big-eyed child and a wan-faced woman with a baby—camped that night at the mouth of a canyon and were on the road at daybreak next morning. The travelers were well into the mountains now.

When the gaunt team dragged into Strawberry Flat hundreds of men and scores of teams were camped there for the night. The driver of the prairie schooner fed and watered the horses while his wife made supper. She found dry wood for kindling in the wagon. Soon a fire was roaring and the little girl was sniffing a jackrabbit stew.

"Goody, goody. Le's hurry up 'n' eat, Sister Mollie," she shouted, waving a spoon excitedly.

After supper Robert Dodson disappeared into the nearest grogshop, and his wife retired to the wagon to nurse her six-weeks-old baby. The little girl washed the dishes.

"Sister Mollie," called the child, "when I'm big I'm gonna marry a prince 'n' he won't ever get drunk 'n' beat me like Rob does you."

"Sh-h-h! You mustn't say such things, Vicky," the older sister admon-

As Victoria flung the door open a man lurched forward (Chap. VI)

ished, and caught the baby in her arms tighter. From the tent barroom where her husband had gone came the words of a drunken chorus:

Exciting times all round the town,
Glory, Glory to Washoe.

Mollie recognized her husband's tipsy laugh. Her slight body shivered.

LIGHT had begun to filter into the sky when Hugh McClintock began his trek into Walker River Range. He put his bay horse, Nevada Jim, at the saddle of a hill and reached the brow that formed part of the lip of a small saucer-shaped valley beyond. A score of morning camp fires shone like glowworms in the misty hollow. By chance he had stumbled on a party of Piutes, very likely the same bunch that had waylaid and shot Tim.

McClintock made to turn back, but as he did so a slim breech-clothed figure shot up almost at his stirrup. Hugh dragged Nevada Jim around and charged straight at the brave.

A red-hot stab seared McClintock's side. A moment, and the sentry was flung headlong before the weight of the horse, which trod the naked body under, and went plunging down the hill. Then a shout behind him told Hugh that he had been seen by the others.

His best chance, he decided, lay in the speed of the bay. He would try to run the Indian ponies off their legs. If they found they could not catch him, the Piutes would give up the chase.

The boy looked back. Well in front of the pursuing group was a young brave mounted on a buckskin. At every stride his horse lengthened the distance between him and his companions.

"Big Chief Heap-in-a-Hurry aims to collect me," the boy told himself aloud. "Me, I got different notions. Get a hustle on you, Jim. Just for a mile or two, till we get to the pass. Then that'll be all, if our luck stands up." What troubled Hugh most was loss of blood from the wound in his side. He might fall out of the saddle from sheer weakness before he reached safety.

Hugh looked back as he galloped up into the pass. The buckskin was far in advance of the other pursuers, which was just what Hugh wanted. The pass was short and narrow. At the very summit a huge boulder outcropped from the ridge. McClintock swung his horse back of this, leaped to the ground, and took from its scabbard the navy revolver he carried.

He had not long to wait. There came the sound of a hoof striking the hard quartz of the ridge. Smoothly Hugh slid round the edge of the rock. The Piute, taken by surprise, jerked the buckskin sideways and tried to raise his rifle. Lightning flashed from McClintock's sixshooter—once, twice. He dived forward and caught the bridle just as the redskin tumbled from the horse. The rifle clattered to the ground.

Hugh took one look at the Indian. It was enough. He would never steal another horse from the whites. The buckskin, frightened, tried to jerk away. Its new owner spoke gently, soothingly. He coaxed the startled animal to the rock and transferred the saddle from the back of Nevada Jim.

Already he could hear approaching horses. Rapidly he cinched and swung astride. Yet an instant, and he was galloping down the western slope. The buckskin was fast and willing. Hugh wondered whether the ranchman who had owned it had been killed.

The pursuit continued for several miles, but the Indians fell always farther to the rear. At last they dropped out. At least Hugh saw them no more.

It was time. McClintock was faint and dizzy. He could barely stick to the saddle by clinging with both hands to the pommel. His wound, irritated by the constant motion, hurt a great deal. Somehow, though, he managed to hang on. So, mile by mile, in a growing delirium, he kept going till he was far up in the Pine Nut Range.

He lost count of time and of distance. He forgot where he was traveling or why. He remembered only Indians, and the fear he had resolutely repressed—which no doubt had been uppermost all the time in the boy's subconscious mind—expressed itself in his delirious talk.

"They're roostin' up there in the hills somewheres. Sure are. Want my topknot for to decorate their tepees. Hump yoreself, you Nevada Jim."

It was the buckskin that saved him, that and the terror. Just before nightfall the horse took him to a Mormon ranch.

A comfortable-looking matron, feeding her chickens, looked up to see the horse and its load motionless before her.

"Land sakes!" she ejaculated. "Father, come here. Buckskin has come home, and—"

She broke off to run to McClintock's aid. He had slid from the saddle to the ground.

II

WHEN his brother Scot drove up from Virginia City to the Mormon settlement to see him, having heard the news that Hugh was wounded to death, he found the boy sitting in the sunshine at the corner of the ranchhouse. This was just a week later.

No two sons of the same father and mother could have been more unlike than Scot and Hugh McClintock. The last-born was counted steady as an eight-day clock, reliable as tested steel. The other walked wild and forbidden paths. Scot was nearly ten years older than Hugh, of splendid physique, tall, indomitably resolute, a born leader. Vanity was his weakness. He was out of question the Beau Brummel of Washoe. Another might have been laughed at for this punctilious devotion to dress, but even in Virginia City nobody was hardy enough to poke fun at this blue-eyed gambler.

"I'm going to take you back with me soon's you can travel, Hugh," he said.

"That'll be tomorrow."

"Sure you can stand the jolting yet?"

"Sure. Ask Mother Jessup here."

"He's doing fine," the rancher's wife agreed.

They started on their journey next morning, made a short day of it on account of Hugh's wound, and put up at Carson for the night. Carson now had two thousand inhabitants, a boom in town lots, and a civic consciousness. Already it was pulling wires to become the capital of Nevada, the "battle-born" state.

Scot hailed Baldy Green, a well-known stagedriver. "How about places for me and Hugh tomorrow, old-timer?"

Baldy rubbed his shiny head. "Full up. Like to ditch a couple of my passengers for you if I could—a jewelry peddler and a sky pilot—but I don't reckon I can, Scot."

"Show 'em to me, Baldy." The eyes of the older McClintock sparkled.

Three minutes later the Beau Brummel of Virginia City might have been seen in earnest conversation with a clergyman from Buffalo, New York.

"Do you really think the redskins are likely to attack the stage tomorrow?" asked the startled missionary.

"Big chance of it, I'd say. Now I'm a professional gambler. What does it matter about me? But you—the only minister in a hundred miles—you can't be spared. Why not wait here a day or two and make sure the Piutes are not around?"

The missionary was frankly frightened, but he had in him the stuff of heroes.

"I'll go if the stage goes," he said stoutly.

Scot McClintock knew when he was beaten temporarily. But he was not the man to give up a point upon which he had set his heart. He looked up a friend of his, the mayor of the town, drew him aside, and whispered persuasively in his ear.

"Never saw your beat for gettin' your own way," the mayor grinned. "All right. I'll rustle up some of the women and ask him."

Scot dropped into the What Cheer House. The jewelry salesman was sitting in a corner. In five minutes McClintock knew all about the peddler's business and how much he hoped to make from the sale of his stock at Virginia.

"But why not sell it here in Carson?"

"My friend, I make more at Virginia."

"Well, you know your business better than I do. Hope we get through without trouble."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"Injuns on warpath. They shot up my brother. I'm taking him up with me to a doctor. From the way the Piutes were heading I rather expect an attack on the stage tomorrow."

The peddler rose to the bait. "And I have paid my fare to Virginia. It's an outrage. I will not travel in danger. You are right, my friend. I sell my stock right here in Carson if I can get a refund."

"I would," agreed McClintock sympathetically, "I know Baldy Green. Let's see if he'll stand for the refund."

The stagedriver played up to his friend with a serious face. If the gentleman wanted to stay at Carson and if McClintock would guarantee him against loss to the company through an empty seat, probably it could be arranged. Incidentally, he mentioned that he had just heard from the clergyman cancelling his passage. He had been urged by a deputation of Carson citizens to stay in town over Sunday and preach on the plaza. This call, he felt, could not be ignored.

Baldy called Scot back as he was leaving. "Afraid the stage will be attacked, are you? Dad gum yore hide, you know the Injuns won't dare come up here on the peck."

"I'd hate to see the jewelry salesman take any chances," Scot explained.

"And preachin' on the plaza. Don't you know there's hawse racin' here every Sunday?" cackled Baldy.

"The ladies can meet an' pray for their wicked husbands. They need it, don't they?"

"Sure do. Well, I got no kick comin'. I won't be here Sunday."

Neither was Scot. He and his brother traveled Virginiaward in the morning.

VIRGINIA CITY, perched on the lower slope of Mt. Davidson, was an uncouth and windswept camp, but it represented uncounted hopes. In this mass of porphyry lay the fabulously rich Comstock Lode, from which in a single generation nearly a billion dollars' worth of ore was to be taken.

From the stage company's office on B Street, Scot guided his brother deftly toward the hotel. The whole appearance of the place was still higgledy-piggledy. Men lived in tents, in dugouts, in prospect holes, in shacks built of dry-goods boxes, canvas sacks, and brush.

"We'll cut across this lot," the gambler suggested.

A mud-stained wagon with a dirty canvas top had been unhitched close to the street. Two bony and dejected horses were tied to the wheels eating some brush, while close at hand a woman and child crouched over a camp fire, cooking a stew. A man sat on the wagon tongue smoking.

A voice from the sidewalk drifted to the brothers. "Trouble, looks like. Sam Dutch has got Red Mike backed up against the bar of the Mile High, and he's tryin' to devil him into drawing a six-shooter."

On the heels of the words there came a shot, followed by a second. The side door of the Mile High burst open, men diving in every direction to escape. After them came a single man, a revolver in his hand. He looked wildly around, then fled to the shelter of the wagon for safety. A huge fellow, bellowing like a bull, tore out of the saloon in pursuit.

The McClintocks wheeled. The man on the tongue of the wagon was disappearing into the bed through the opening in the canvas. But the woman and the little girl, terror-stricken, stood spellbound beside the fire. Pursued and pursuer were charging straight toward them. A bullet struck the iron pot. The child screamed.

Roughly the woman and the little girl went down at the same instant, flung to the ground by the impact of flying bodies. They heard more shots, but they knew nothing of what was going on. For the McClintock brothers were crouched above them, shielding them from the danger of wild bullets. They did not see the red-headed man stumble and pitch forward, nor did they see the big ruffian at his heels fling shot after shot into his prostrate form.

Hugh released his weight from the child. "Run right along into the wagon where yore dad is, l'il girl, and don't turn yore head," he said.

Slowly he turned to look toward the big ruffian who was now straddling the body of his victim. From his bootleg a horn-handled bowie knife projected.

"Wanted to be chief, eh?" the killer jeered. "There'll be only one chief in Virginia while Sam Dutch is here. If any one else wants the job, he'll get his like Red Mike did." He shuffled away, slow of movement. His gestures were heavy, except when shooting. No badman in Washoe was quicker on the draw.

Scot helped from the ground the woman he had thrown. She looked at him, her breast rising and falling deep, fear still quick in the soft brown eyes.

"You saved my life," she said. "I'll never forget—never."

There was a jangling laugh at her shoulder.

"Tha's right. Always a fool if you can find a chance to be one, Moll."

SCOT turned. "Did you find what you went to look for in the wagon, sir?" he asked, raking the woman's husband with scornful eyes. Then from the wagon came a weak little wail. The woman excused herself hurriedly and climbed into the wagon. "Have you got a baby there?" asked Scot, a new note in his voice.

The father grunted a sulky "Yes."

"A baby, Hugh. The first in Virginia City. What do you think about that?" Scot wheeled back on the father. "Boy or girl?"

"Girl!"

"Great. We'll call her Virginia."

"Her name's Susan," the father growled.

"No matter. We'll change it. Last name?"

"Dodson. Her name's goin' to stay right what it is now."

A crowd of men had poured upon the vacant lot to view the scene of the killing. Scot climbed into the bed of an empty ore wagon and clapped his hands for silence. Only those in his immediate vicinity heard him, wherefore Scot got what he wanted by the simple expedient of firing his revolver into the air.

"Boys," he began simply, "I'm going to tell you something that will please you a lot. We've got a baby in camp, a real, genuine, blown-in-the-bottle guaranteed baby, the first one that ever hit Virginia City. It's a lady baby, and her name's Virginia. Now we're going to give this kid a good send-off, because she's our baby. Virginia is her name and Virginia is her home. I'm going to pass the hat, boys. Dig deep into your jeans, every last one of you. Whoop 'er up now."

Everybody gave. Scot appointed a committee to count the spoils and another committee to invite the town's brass band down to the reception. Meanwhile he whispered in Hugh's ear and the boy carried a message to the prairie schooner, where the woman came out to the tent flap with the baby in her arms and a tousled little girl by her side. Hugh took off his hat.

"Madam, we'd like to borrow for a little while yore family. We're figurin' on a sort of a parade, and we want the baby in it. We'd like to have you an' the li'l girl go along to see the baby's taken care of proper. The camp's first baby!"

Hugh charged straight at the brave (Chap. I)

The woman turned timidly to the husband. "I don't know. What do you think, Rob?"

"Oh, let's go, Sister Mollie," urged Victoria. "I wantta ride in the peerade."

The woman whispered with her husband. He broke out roughly, "Don't be so danged finicky. Your dress is all right."

"We'll come," the young woman told the boy. "In a few minutes we'll be ready. And thank you for wanting us."

As master of ceremonies Scot, mounted on a beautiful white horse, rode at the head of the procession. The stage came next, followed by Virginia's young and exuberant brass band. After this marched the fire organizations in their red shirts and helmets. Empty ore wagons fell into line and were quickly filled with miners. A mixed crowd of residents on foot brought up the rear.

The contributions already collected had been poured from the hats into a tub. This was tied to the back of the stage, in the place where trunks and packages usually rested. All along A Street and back along B Street men fought to get at the tub with their money. The band played *Old Dan Tucker* and other popular airs, but out of deference to a divided public opinion—the Civil War was being fought at this time—did not give either *Yankee Doodle* or *Dixie*. There were speeches, of course, full of bombast, eloquence, and local patriotism, all of which were vociferously applauded.

A big lawyer with a long yellow beard was at the head of the committee appointed to count the money. His name was William M. Stewart. Later he represented Nevada in the United States Senate for many years. At the request of Scot McClintock he made the presentation speech, the baby in his arms at the time. The total amount collected ran over thirty-two hundred dollars.

"Friends," said the future Senator, "I move a committee of three to take charge of Miss Virginia's educational fund. If this is satisfactory I shall ask the citizens of the camp to name the trustees."

The crowd shouted "McClintock" and "Stewart." The lawyer consulted with Scot. "Mr. McClintock and I are glad to serve as trustees in your behalf, gentlemen," he announced. "With your permission we shall name Robert Dodson, the father of Virginia, as the third member."

In the months that followed, Dodson flew into a rage whenever the trust fund was mentioned. The fact was that McClintock and Stewart refused to let their co-trustee get his fingers on any of it to dissipate.

III

ONE afternoon a few days later, Scot McClintock made his way to the Crystal Palace, where he dealt faro to a high-priced clientele. As he began to deal, his face took on the gambler's mask of impassivity. This mask did not lift when a heavy-set huge man slouched into the Crystal Palace and to the corner where McClintock presided. It was Sam Dutch, and Dutch meant trouble. The badman was jealous of his popularity, his influence in the camp, and above all of the fearlessness that would not accept intimidation. Scot knew this. He knew, too, that if either of his hands lifted for an instant from the cards the ruffian would fling slug after slug into his body.

The furtive attention of everybody focussed on two men, the killer and the victim. When would Dutch find his excuse to strike? Then into the Crystal Palace a lean sun-and-wind browned man walked. He moved lightly forward to the faro table. Carelessly, it appeared. Hugh McClintock chose the place next to Dutch.

"Don't crowd, young fella," warned the bully heavily. "Me, when I play, I want room aplenty."

The pony express rider tossed a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table. "Chips," he said, without even looking at Dutch.

The eyes of the McClintocks met. Hugh was no gambler. He was sitting in, Scot knew, to share and lessen the risk. If he could draw the gunman's attention for even an instant at the critical moment it might save the dealer's life. A stack of chips slid across to the boy.

"Didja hear me speak, kid? Know who I am?" blustered the ruffian.

"Why, no, I don't reckon I do."

"I'm Sam Dutch."

"Room for both of us," said Hugh coolly, and he did not give a fraction of an inch. Instead, he coppered the bully's bet, playing the ace to lose.

Scot slid out the cards. The ace lost. Hugh reached for his winnings.

"I'll collect on that ace," Dutch announced. "Don't forget, young fella, that I'm chief in this town."

"So? Who elected you?"

This cool defiance put the match to the ruffian's rage. The long blade of his bowie flashed. Almost simultaneously a derringer and a navy revolver flamed. The bowie clattered to the floor, as Dutch pitched forward upon the faro table, scattering chips and cards in all directions.

"I take you all to witness, gentlemen," Scot said quietly to the onlookers. "My brother and I fired in self-defense."

Someone thrust a hand under the big body. "Heart's still beating," he announced.

"Then send for a doctor and have him looked after. I'll pay the bill," Scot said, and turned to his brother. "Boy, I'm proud of you. Come. Let's get out of here."

After what had just taken place at the Crystal Palace the bright sunshine of Nevada was welcome to both brothers.

A little girl stood squarely in front of them on the broken sidewalk.

"Mister Goodmans," she said, addressing them both, "don't you 'member me?"

"Of course. You're Vicky," Scott told her.

She came directly to business. "Rob, he's most always drunk 'n' we ain't got nothin' to eat. Mollie 'n' me's jist awful hungry."

"What!" Scot exclaimed and turned to Hugh. "Go in to Groton's with Vicky and get her a good dinner. I'll see what supplies I can pick up and go down to the wagon with them."

LESS than half an hour later, Scot, with a sack of supplies, came to the narrow flat where the prairie schooner stood. As he reached the wagon Mollie Dodson called from within, "Did you find Rob, Vicky?"

Perhaps the firmness of his tread told her at once of her mistake. She leaned out of the open flap.

"I—I was looking for Vicky," she said.

"Yes. I met Vicky. She wanted to know why the trustees of the Virginia Dodson Fund were not attending to business. So I'm here."

"Oh! Vicky oughtn't to have done that."

"Vicky did just right." Scot opened his sack. "Our baby must be well fed. It's my business to see that, and I'm going to do it from now."

He built a fire while she watched him, the baby in her arms. Then his glance swept round and found a battered water bucket. "Where's the spring, Mrs. Dodson?" he asked.

It was in an arroyo nearly a quarter of a mile distant. Reluctantly she pointed.

"Robert forgot to get water before he left. He's—away looking for work," she explained with a slight tremor of the lips.

He liked her better for the little lie. Scot had seen the man in town yesterday drunk, and again today sleeping under an empty wagon in a vacant lot. He returned with the water and made a batch of biscuits and some hot coffee. While she ate he spoke.

"I reckon I can guess how you feel," he said gently. "Back where you come from persons that take help from others are—well, they don't hold their heads up. But this is the West, a new country. We share with each other here. In a kind of way we're all one big family. I'm your big brother, and I'm certainly going to see this baby is fed proper."

She murmured something he could not catch for the break in her voice. Then Hugh and Vicky arrived.

"Look here, Sister Mollie," Vicky cried. "He got it for me. Mister—Mister Santa Claus." One finger pointed straight at Hugh while she held out for the inspection of her sister a doll with blue eyes and flaxen hair. Vicky was clearly in a seventh heaven.

Mollie turned to the boy. "Did she ask you for it?"

"No, ma'am. I been hankerin' to buy that doll for someone. Now I feel a heap better."

In the days that followed Mollie Dodson had occasion many times to feel the kindness of Scot McClintock. Hugh had departed to report for duty with the

express company, but his brother made it a point to see that the little family in the prairie schooner did not lack for food. To all of which Robert Dodson's attitude was one of sneering suspicion. He was both willing that another man should supply his family with the food it needed, and mean enough to bully his wife because of it. His whole attitude implied that the two were carrying on a clandestine love affair.

Scot returned from the Dodson camp one day, lips close set and eyes smoldering. Mollie was nursing a black eye. She had fallen, she told him, against the corner of the wagon. He had not believed her, and Vicky had settled the matter past doubt. She was waiting for him in a little gulch near the camp, waiting to tell him in a burst of impotent childish passion that Dodson had beaten Mollie.

As it chanced, McClintock met the ne'er-do-well a hundred yards farther down the gulch. Dodson was, for a wonder, sober. Scot caught him by the coat lapel and swung him sharply round.

"I'm going to teach you not to lay a hand on—on a woman. Right now I'm going to give you the thrashing of your life."

The eyes of the loafer flashed fear. "You lemme go," he panted, trying to break away. "Don't you dass touch me. Think I don't know about you an' her? Think I'm a plumb idjit?"

A smash across the mouth stopped his words. He made a swift pass with his right hand. Scot's left shot out and caught the wrist, twisting it back and up. A bullet was flung into the sky; then, under the urge of a pain which leaped from wrist to shoulder of the tortured arm, the revolver dropped harmlessly to the ground.

"You're breakin' my arm," Dodson shrieked, sagging at the knees as he gave to the pressure.

McClintock set his teeth and went through with the job of giving Dodson a thrashing. Afterwards to the bully who lay on the sand sobbing with rage and pain, he gave curt orders.

"You'll go back to town and not show up at the wagon tonight. Tomorrow you'll tell Mrs. Dodson you had a fight. You'll not tell her who with or what it was about. If you ever lay a hand on her again or on Vicky, I'll break every bone in your body. Understand?"

Scot turned away. Already he questioned the wisdom of what he had done.

A WASHOE zephyr was playing impish tricks in Virginia City. It screamed down the side of Mt. Davidson in a gale of laughter, filling the air with the white powder of alkali dust. Scot McClintock working his way along B Street, took refuge in a saloon. His glance fell on a small group near the farther end of the bar. The central figure of it was Sam Dutch.

Dutch, clinking glasses with a girl, looked round to see his enemy before him. He was taken at a disadvantage. Was this a trap set for him? If he made a move would the younger McClintock or some other ally of the gambler fill him full of slugs? Nervously his eyes stole round the big room. They came back to the clean, straight figure standing in front of him.

"No place for you, Dutch," the faro dealer said curtly. "The altitude's not good for your health. You've got a weak heart, you know. Go home—now—right away—and stay there till the stage leaves. Then try Aurora or Dayton."

The badman moistened his dry lips with his tongue. He had come to the parting of the ways and knew it. Should he take a chance and draw? He had killed many men. And yet—he could not do it. With McClintock's cold and steely stare in his eyes he could not drop the glass from his hand and reach for a revolver. The wills of the two fought out the battle, and the stronger won.

"I—I reckon you're right," Dutch heard himself say huskily. "I'm still a sick man. I was thinkin' thataway myself before you came in."

"Keep right on thinking it. Think yourself out of Virginia inside of twenty-four hours," ordered Scot implacably.

The discredited killer did not leave by stage. He went out in a private buckboard to Carson, from whence he drifted to the new camp Aurora, already the largest town in that section of Nevada. His self-esteem and public repute were shortly restored by an encounter with another badman. He shot his victim in the stomach while they were drinking together, after which he was cock of the walk at Aurora.

The weeks passed, became months.

Spring browned to summer and summer crisped to autumn. Then, one day, Vicky came to the International Hotel and sent up word that she wanted to see Scott McClintock.

"What's wrong, Vicky?" he asked, slipping his arm around her shoulder.

She began to sob, and through her broken words he gathered the story. Dodson had come home drunk while his wife was getting a bucket of water, had flung himself on the bed without seeing the baby, and had fallen at once into heavy stertorous slumber. When Mollie got back the child was dead, smothered by her own father.

McClintock took on himself all the arrangements for the funeral. He dragged Dodson out of a grog shop, soused his head in a horse trough, and when he became sober saw that he remained so until the burial.

The day after the interment Scot called on Mrs. Dodson. "What are you and Vicky going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," the bereaved mother answered listlessly. "Vicky ought not to stay here. But I've no place to send her.

"Mr. Stewart and I have discussed that. If you're willing we'll divert the baby's fund to Vicky and send her down to Miss Clapp's school at Carson."

Tears brimmed to her eyes. "You're good. I—I'll be awf'lly lonesome without her, but she'd better go. This is no life for her to lead."

"Is it a life for any young woman to lead?" he asked, pointedly.

She felt her pulse beating. "I made my choice years ago," she said.

"We have to make fresh choices every day," he told her. "There's a gulf between you and—him. Have you any hope that it can be bridged?"

"No. But I married him—for better or worse. I'll stay with him. Perhaps he'll change."

"Would you waste your life on such an impossible chance? Don't do it. Begin again."

"How?"

"There's work at Virginia for a hundred women. You can mend clothes or cook or keep boarders—anything for a start. Afterwards—" He let the future take care of itself.

In spite of her dependence Mollie had a capacity for dumb resistance. Scot left her knowing that he had the empty victory of having convinced her judgment but not the deep instinct in her born of habit and tradition.

A medley of voices roused him from reflection as he reached the end of the business part of town.

"Just in time, Scot. We're aimin' to hang Dodson."

McCLINTOCK stood rooted. Here was an easy way for Mollie out of her troubles. Scot's judgment was that he was better dead. None the less he pushed a way through the mob with his broad shoulders to the cowering wretch with the rope around his neck.

"What's he done?" he demanded of the man who seemed to be the leader.

"Killed his own baby. Then when Jerry Mulligan told him what for an hour ago he stuck a knife in him."

"Is Jerry dead?"

"No. Not yet. Doc says maybe he'll die."

"Let's wait, boys," Scot said. "Maybe Jerry will pull through."

"She'll be well rid of him," a voice cried.

"Say, who started this gabfest?" demanded the man holding the other end of the rope that had been slipped over Dodson's head. "Let's hustle this job through. I got a man to meet right soon."

McClintock met him eye to eye. "You can go meet him right now, Six-Fingered Pete. The hanging's off."

"Who says it's off?" blustered Pete.

"I say so."

"Who elected you judge and jury, Scot?" asked the leader.

"Sorry to interfere, boys. I've just come in from seeing Mrs. Dodson. She's all broke up about the baby. You wouldn't want to make things harder for her. It doesn't matter whether this fellow lives or dies. Nobody cares about him. He's nothing. We'll hold him till we see how Jerry comes out—just stick him in the calaboose."

"I reckon Scot's right," someone spoke up. "If it's gonna worry the lady any, might as well postpone the necktie party."

The rescued man tried to whine out his thanks to the gambler. Scot turned on his heel without a word.

AFTER the death of the baby, Mollie's husband practically deserted her. There came a day when she defi-

nitely broke with her past life. She moved into town and opened a small shop where she sold home-cooked food to miners eager to buy her cakes, cookies, pies, and doughnuts. She called her place the Back Home Kitchen, and she did a thriving business. Then when he discovered how well she was doing Dodson began to hang around the Back Home to bleed its mistress of what she earned.

Every day or two Dodson robbed the till. He boasted of it to his cronies when he was half seas over. To Scot, who was keeping an eye on him in expectation of just such a possibility, the news was promptly carried. He learned that the man paid his visits to the Back Home in the evening.

Two days later Dodson knocked at the door of the shop and was admitted. He slouched forward to the counter.

"Come through, old woman."

"I can't. There's just enough for the rent."

"You're holdin' out on me. I won't stand it—not a minute."

Mollie recognized the signs of the abusive stage of intoxication. Presently he would begin to beat her if she opposed him. But she could not let him take the rent money.

"You can't have it. That's all there's to it," she cried.

Mollie flew to the till as the man came around the counter. He struck her again and again while she tried to shield herself from the blows.

Neither of them heard the door open or saw a man take the counter in one flying leap. An arm reached out and plucked Dodson from his victim. It hurled him back against the wall, where he struck with great force, hung for a moment, and dropped limply to the floor.

Mollie lifted her eyes to those of Scot McClintock and read there that which brought a burst of music into her heart. She had fought against this—oh, how she had schooled herself to deny it! But with his strong arms round her, his heart beating against her own, what was the use of pretending any longer? Her supple body made a little motion of nestling closer. She began to sob quietly.

"Forget him," Scot told her. "He's out of your life. I gave him his chance. I gave you yours to go it alone. That's ended. I'm going to take care of you."

He lifted her flushed face and kissed it. That kiss stirred to life all the Puritan blood of Mollie, the racial inheritance from a rock-ribbed ancestry.

"No—no—no!" she cried, and fled to the room back of the shop.

In the days that followed Scott McClintock fought the fight of his life. He knew how this world would take it if he overcame Mollie's scruples. Hugh would be hurt and shocked, but he would not give him up. Virginia City would be interested but not outraged, for the town had by this time become accustomed to unexpected shifts in marital relations. The legal divorce had not yet reached Nevada, but a simple substitute for it was not infrequent; and if Dodson felt aggrieved he could always appeal to Judge Colt as a court of last resort. Yes, but Scot had to think of Mollie herself—and the thought drenched him with despair. How could he protect her if he remained a stranger in her life? Yet if he broke the code with her he would be saving her from distress only to plunge her into greater trouble.

IV

HUGH had given up riding. He wrote Scot from Aurora, where the boy was filling a wood contract, and proposed that Scot join him. The older brother declined. He could not leave the neighborhood of Mollie till he was assured she had the strength to manage her own affairs.

Aurora was a gold camp in the first flush of its prosperity, and the place of which Sam Dutch boasted that he was chief. When Hugh knew that Dutch was in town he prepared for trouble. Every day he practised with his navy revolver when he was up in the hills with his woodchoppers. Every night in his cabin he carefully oiled and loaded the weapon.

It was late afternoon one sultry day when Hugh, walking down the crooked business street of the town, saw a familiar figure. Out of a saloon, named the Glory Hole from Aurora's famous treasure lode, a big bearded man in an army coat came slouching. It was the first time Hugh had seen Sam Dutch since their meeting at the Crystal Palace.

Dutch stood in front of the saloon a moment, uncertain which way to turn. Apparently he was in arrears of sleep, for a cavernous yawn spread over his face. The yawn came suddenly to a period and left the man gaping, his mouth ludicrously open.

"You here!" he presently growled.

Hugh said nothing. Dutch made a mistake. He delivered an ultimatum.

"I'll give you twenty-four hours to get out. If you're here then—"

Hugh did not lift his eyes from the killer. "I'll be here," he said. "If you feel that way, no use waiting twenty-four hours. Come ashootin'."

The Chief of Aurora was startled. Some months since, this boy had tossed a defiance in his teeth. Before he had had time to draw a weapon two bullets had crashed into him. Dutch was no coward, but he was not used to men like the McClintocks.

"Not now. Give you twenty-four hours," the big man snarled. "Like yore brother did me when I was feelin' all stove up. Hit the trail on the jump, or I'll sure collect you, kid or no kid."

"You're wasting time," Hugh said quietly.

The killer cursed savagely. But he did not draw his six-shooter. Instead, he backed into the Glory Hole. "Not room for you'n me here both. Twenty-four hours. You done heard me."

A red-shirted miner turned beaming on McClintock. "You blamed li'l horn toad, if you didn't call a bluff on Dutch and make it stick."

Hugh made no mistake. He had won the first brush, but he knew the real battle was still to come. He also understood that at the bottom of his heart a killer is as superstitious as a gambler, and he resolved to exploit this knowledge. That night, after learning the location of Dutch's cabin, he crept up to the hut, made certain arrangements outside, and waited. It was close to one o'clock in the morning when Dutch returned to his cabin. With him was a companion whom Hugh recognized as one William Buckley. Quickly and stealthily the two men dodged inside. Once in, Dutch bolted the door and pulled the window blinds.

DUTCH was slipping out of his long army coat when there came a gentle *tap—tap—tap* at one of the windows. Again there came a slow *tap—tap—tap,* this time on the opposite window. Dutch whirled, drew his gun and fired. Then the *tap—tap—tap,* clear and measured, sounded a second time at the first window. Straight at the sound the killer flung another shot. He rushed to the window and drew back the sack used for a curtain. There was nobody at the window either alive or dead.

As Dutch stood there, frightened and bewildered, there came a sound that turned his flesh to goosequills. Down the wind was borne a sobbing scream like the wail of a lost soul. The slow *tap—tap—tap* sounded a third time on the window.

The gun-fighter trembled. "Bill, I—I done got my call."

Buckley felt none too comfortable himself, but he managed a laugh. "Sho, Sam! Nothin' but the wind."

A high mocking laugh trembled out of the night as though in answer to Buckley's suggestion. Each man read fear in the eyes facing his.

"It—that sounded like—like Al Morford the day I shot him," gasped Dutch, clutching at his companion's sleeve. "He—he was laughin' at me when I drew on him and asked him where he'd have it."

"Let's hit the grit back to the Glory Hole," Buckley suggested. "We'll feel better once we get outside of a few drinks. Come on, Sam."

They slipped from the cabin toward the road. Presently Hugh McClintock stole up to the cabin and removed a tick-tack from each of the shattered windows. He cut down from the scrub pine at the mouth of the gorge a kind of aeolian harp he had made out of violin strings and a soap box. The wind, whistling through this, had given out the weird wail which had shaken the nerves of Dutch. The falsetto laughter had been an histrionic effort of Hugh's own vocal cords. It happened that just now his voice was changing.

The youngster went home to bed and to sleep. In the morning he wrote a letter to his father and another to Scot, ate a good breakfast, and loaded his revolver and a sawed-off shotgun.

By way of back alleys he reached the Glory Hole and slipped through the back entrance to a small table in the darkest corner of the saloon. Except for the bartender, and two men who

were discussing the bonanza in Last Chance Hill, Hugh was alone in the place. The bartender, looking curiously at the young fellow with the sawed-off shotgun on the table in front of him, was a little puzzled to know what to do.

Presently, however, there came an irruption of patrons and the man with the apron became busy. Then another group swept into the place. There were five of them. In the van was Dutch. Hugh recognized Buckley, and two desperadoes known as Daily, and Three-Fingered Jack. They took a table close to the one where Hugh was sitting. Not until they were seated did they notice the boy with the sawed-off shotgun.

"If any of you gentlemen have business elsewhere," said Hugh quick, "Mr. Dutch and I will excuse you."

All of them, it appeared, had matters needing their attention. They moved swiftly and without delay.

WITH the tip of his forefinger Hugh tapped slowly three times on the wooden top of the table. The bad man gave a low moan. His brain was too paralyzed to permit him to try to draw his revolver.

"Hands on the table," ordered Hugh.

The big hands trembled up and fell there. Abjectly Dutch pleaded for the mercy he had never given another man. He would leave camp. He would go to Mexico. He would quit carrying a gun. Any terms demanded he would meet.

Hugh said nothing more. For thirty minutes by the watch he held the desperado prisoner. When Dutch got restless he tapped the table three times with his finger tip, and the man began to sweat fear again. The big bully never knew at what moment the boy might crook his finger.

"You're goin' on a journey," Hugh explained at last. "You're takin' the stage outa town. And you're not buyin' a return trip ticket. Understand?"

Under orders from Hugh the bartender disarmed Dutch. Still covered by the shotgun, the sullen dethroned chief climbed into the stage that was about to leave.

From a saloon farther down the street a Negro's mellow voice was lifted in song:

So git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
You're too late to come to supper.

A crowd had gathered on the street. It watched with eagerness the taming of this badman. In the old fighting West nobody was more despised than a cowed "man-eater."

The stage rolled away in a cloud of dust. Hugh turned, to find himself facing a quiet man with nerves of steel —Captain J. A. Palmer.

"Don't you know better than to let Sam Dutch get away alive after you've got the drop on him?" Palmer asked.

"I couldn't kill him in cold blood. I'm no murderer."

Palmer looked the youth over with a new respect.

"Young fellow, I want you. What you doing now?"

"Wood contract."

"Finish it. Then come see me. We want a shotgun messenger to ride with the stage. Got to stop these hold-ups. Big pay."

Young McClintock shook his head. "Got another job waiting—one with Uncle Sam."

"Going to join the army?"

"Yes."

The Captain nodded. "Good enough. Your country has first call. Go to it, boy."

A LETTER from Scot delayed Hugh from carrying out his intention of joining the army. The older brother wrote that he had been offered a commission and was anxious to get to the front, but that certain matters were just now keeping him in town. Young McClintock wrote back at once that he would join his brother whenever he was ready to leave. He wanted, if possible, to serve in his company. Meanwhile, his wood contract finished, Hugh took temporarily a place with the express company as shotgun messenger.

The job was a very dangerous one. The departure of Sam Dutch from Aurora had not ended the lawlessness. Hold-ups were frequent, and the messenger did not get or expect an even break. In the narrow twisting canyons below the town it was easy to lie in ambush and surprise the stage as it carried bullion from the mines.

Hugh was lucky. His stage was "stuck up" once, but it chanced that no bullion

was on board. On another occasion he left one of the bandits lying in the road with a load of buckshot in him. The boy's reputation for gameness grew. Finally, Bob Howland, city marshal, asked young McClintock to be his deputy.

"We're going to clean up this town and I need help. You'll sure have a merry time."

But Hugh declined. "No, I'm going into the army soon as I hear from Scot. I'll stick with the stage till then."

Hugh had occasion next day to go into the Glory Hole. Bob Howland was talking to the girl dealing faro. The marshal walked across the floor and joined McClintock.

"Come outside," he said quietly.

They strolled out together. "Jimmy Sayres was killed this morning by Johnny Rogers," Howland explained. "You know Rogers is working for Johnson on his ranch at Smith's Valley."

"Sayres is one of the San Francisco gang. They will be out for revenge."

"Captain Palmer has served notice on them to lay off Johnny Rogers. If they don't we'll organize a branch of the vigilantes, as they did at Virginia not long since."

"Then it's a showdown?"

"It's a showdown."

The vengeance of the gunmen fell however on Johnson, the rancher who employed Rogers. His body was found one morning lying in the street. An organization of vigilantes was completed immediately, with Captain Palmer as leader. The men were divided into companies with captains. Palmer checked off a list of gunmen to be arrested. This commission was given to Hugh. He divided his company into groups and set about finding the men whose names he had on the list. Quickly they were rounded up.

Captain Palmer, on behalf of the vigilantes, brushed aside the formalities of the law and organized a people's court. About a dozen men were tried. The evidence showed conclusively that Daily, Buckley, and two others had murdered Johnson. The four were convicted and sentenced to be hanged, but a certain Carberry, known as "Irish Tom," escaped the extreme penalty by one vote. That deciding vote was cast by Hugh McClintock.

Someone wired Governor Nye for help to save the gunmen. Nevada was now a territory, and the fight was already on for statehood. The Governor sent a telegram to Howland. The wire read:

IT IS REPORTED HERE THAT AURORA IS IN THE HANDS OF A MOB. DO YOU NEED ANY ASSISTANCE?

The marshal sent a prompt message back. It read:

EVERYTHING QUIET HERE. FOUR MEN WILL BE HANGED IN FIFTEEN MINUTES.

The gallows had been built on the summit of the hill in the center of North Silver Street. Young McClintock, in charge of the company which guarded the gallows, was bloodless to the lips. There was something horrible to him in this blotting out from life of men who had no chance to make a fight for existence. But in his heart he knew the sentence was just.

THE Confederacy made its last grand gesture at Appomattox. Scot McClintock, on his way back to Virginia City from the front, wrote Mollie Dodson that he would stop off at Carson for a few hours.

She was afraid to meet him. She had always pushed far back into her secret consciousness the sweet memories of Scot that had persisted. It had been a matter of duty. Her code bound her to the view that she could not be the wife of one man, though in name only, and at the same time love another even in the secret recesses of her soul.

Into the house burst a girl, shining in the radiance and clean strength of her young teens. She was slim and straight and dark. With a whirlwind rush of her supple body Vicky launched herself on her sister.

"Oh, Mollie — Mollie darling," she cried. "It's been the longest time since I saw you. Tell me all about everything."

"I've had a letter from—from Colonel McClintock," Mollie said. "He expects to pass through Carson this morning."

Vicky hugged her again. "Why don't you marry him, now you've got a divorce?" she asked.

The color poured into Mollie's cheeks. "How you talk!" she gasped. "He—Colonel McClintock—has been a good

friend to us. You mustn't get foolish notions."

Vicky caught her by the shoulders. "Sister Mollie, can you tell me, honest Injun, that you don't love him? Or that he doesn't care for you?"

There was a mist of tears in Mollie's eyes. "How do I know? I sent him away. I told him to forget me. Men don't remember always—like we women do."

Vicky took active charge of the campaign. "I'll tell you what, Sister Mollie. You put on that blue-print dress with the flowered pattern — an' when he comes, forget every single thing except how glad you are to see him. Then if Colonel McClintock doesn't think you're just dear—"

"He does think so, just as he always has."

Scot came across the room in three long strides and swept Mollie into his arms.

"You've heard," she cried.

"That the courts have freed you. Of course." Scot turned. "Vicky, when can you have my girl ready?" he demanded.

"Ready for what?"

"For the wedding, of course."

"In twenty minutes," answered Vicky promptly.

"Good. I met Father Marston at the Ormsby House when the stage came in. I'll be back in time."

He knew where to find Father Marston, who was chaplain of the legislature, now in special session. Delavan Marston was a character. Rough and rugged, he struck straight from the shoulder. His tastes and habits were liberal. He liked a good cigar and a good glass of wine. Generally he was called Father Marston, though he was a Protestant.

McClintock stopped the tall, gaunt parson on his way out of the assembly.

"I want you to marry me," he announced.

"Who to?"

"To Mrs. Dodson."

"A divorced woman."

Scot met him eye to eye. "Yes, sir."

"I don't believe in divorces, Colonel."

"There are divorces and divorces, Father. Do you know anything about Robert and Mollie Dodson?"

"Know 'em both. She's a good woman. The less said about him the better, I reckon. Maybe she's entitled to a good husband. Looks thataway to me. "I'll marry you. If it's a sin the Lord will have to charge it against me. When do you want to be married?"

"Now. Soon as I can get a license. Meet you at her house in fifteen minutes."

Father Marston was waiting when Scot reached the house with the license.

V

FORTUNE picks her favorites strangely. While the McClintocks were away at the war Robert Dodson, incompetent and worthless, developed from a pauper to a millionaire. His was one of the sudden shifts of luck to which Virginia City was becoming used.

Dodson's rise to affluence was a camp joke. It was said that he sold two bags of bones and a pile of kindling for a million dollars. What he actually did was to swap his ramshackle wagon and starving team for fifty feet in the Never Say Die. The trade was made while Dodson was drunk, and his saloon cronies chuckled over the way he had been sold. And then a mine adjacent to the Never Say Die struck it rich.

The Never Say Die sank a shaft and ran a crosscut. This cut into a vein that appeared to be a bonanza. Half seas over again, Dodson sold out his interest in both prospects at the height of the boom. Within a week it was known that the crosscut had run into only a small pocket.

Luck pursued Dodson. He took a flyer in Ophir stock, and the Ophir soared. He invested in Crown Point and the Belcher. Both were big winners.

Presently a younger brother of the new magnate appeared on the scene to manage his interests. Ralph Dodson, a big athletic fellow with glossy black hair and cold dark eyes, had a powerful influence over Robert Dodson. The man pulled himself up and stopped drinking. He was of nature parsimonious, and he hung on to his fortune in spite of the parasites who fawned on him. Ralph's cool business judgment was a factor in the rapid increase of it.

Scot McClintock returned to civil life to find that the wastrel and ne'er-do-well was an important figure in the community. Both Scot and his brother had saved money. They had, too, a long credit at the banks and among private

friends. They went into freighting on an extensive scale. They bought teams, increasing gradually the size of their business. Ore and wood contracts were their specialties.

Vicky returned to school in Carson when Scot moved to Virginia City. When she reached the age of sixteen Scot sent her to a young lady's seminary at San Francisco. For a year she remained in the city at the Golden Gate.

Hugh had not seen Vicky since the day when she first set out for school at Carson years ago.

"What's she look like now?" he asked Scot when he heard the girl was returning from San Francisco. "Must be a right sizable little girl now, I reckon. Last time I was in Sacramento I sent her a black doll. Here's the letter she wrote me. I'd think they'd teach her to spell better."

Scot read the note.

Dere Mister Santa Claws,

I got the doll. Thank you very much for it. I like dolls. We had bluebery pie for dinner. Do you like bluebery pie? I do. Wel I must close for this time your greatful little friend

Victoria Lowell.

"I can imagine how she looked," Hugh remarked. "Blueberry pie painted on her face when she wrote that letter probably." He shifted the conversation to business. "Are you going down to Piodie or do you want me to go?"

Piodie was the newest camp in Nevada. Discovery of ore had just been made and a stampede for the new diggings was on. They were said to be very rich in both gold and silver. If this proved true, the handling of freight to the new camp would be profitable.

"You go, Hugh. I don't want to leave Mollie just now."

The next morning, accordingly, Hugh started on horseback for Piodie. It was noon when he passed through Reno, the new town just brought into existence by the Central Pacific, built the previous year. He jogged along at the steady road gait which is neither quite a trot nor a walk. The miles fell behind him hour after hour. The sun sank into the hills.

THE traveler camped in the sage. It was late afternoon when he rode down through Piodie Canyon to the flats where enterprising real estate agents were laying out suburbs of the new camp. Hugh turned in at a feed corral and swung from the saddle stiffly. From the stables came a familiar voice lifted in a cheerful song:

He lived at peace with all mankind,
In friendship he was true;
His coat had pocket holes behind,
His pantaloons were blue.

Hugh grinned and looked in. A man of Falstaffian girth was oiling a set of harness.

"Ain't old man Grimes wore out them blue pants yet?"

The fat man whirled. "Hell's hinges! If it ain't Kid McClintock." He fell on the young man and pounded him with hamlike fists. "Say, I'll bet Byers'll be plumb tickled to see you."

"Byers here, too?"

"Sure as you're a foot high. That dang railroad done run us outa business. So we got this feed corral here. Didn't you see the sign: Pony Express Corral, Budd & Myers, Props? 'Props.' is short for Proprietors. It means we own this here place."

Hugh registered intelligence. "Why, dad gum it, I'm a prop. myownse'f. Freighting and Contracting, McClintock & McClintock, Props."

"Yes, I done heard you been keepin' two jumps ahead of the wolf. I reckon that's why you come to a good town at last."

"Is it a good camp? That's what I came to find out."

"Kid, it's a sockdolager. Why—why—doggone yore hide, this camp's got Virginia skinned four ways from Sunday. It's the best ever. Ore from the grass roots. Silver everywhere—all 'round. Millions o' tons of it." He waved a fat hand expansively as he warmed to his theme. "Son, you tie up to Piodie an' you'll sure do yorese'f proud."

It was a live camp. So much was apparent at a glance. Without any plan Hugh drifted down Turkey Creek Avenue enjoying the raw turbulent youth of the place. Two men were standing in the shadow of an unlighted building as he passed. McClintock did not see them. One of the men pressed the other's arm.

"That's Hugh McClintock," he whispered.

The second—a huge slouching figure—gave a guttural snarl. Simultaneously

his hand slipped back toward his hip.

"Not right here, Dutch," the smaller man murmured. "Get him from the alley as he's comin' back. You can do that an' make yore getaway back to Monument Street."

Hugh wandered to the end of the street, then strolled slowly back. In the lee of a storage warehouse abutting on an alley the young man stopped to light a cigarette. Something whizzed past his ear and stuck quivering in the wooden wall. In the darkness streaks of fire flamed—one, two, three.

With one swift dive of his lithe body Hugh found cover behind a dry-goods box. In transit his revolver leaped to air. But he did not fire. He lay, crouched close against the box, listening with taut nerves for any sound that might betray the position of his enemy. He meant to find out if possible who this expert knife thrower was. First, he wanted to get the ruffian lying thirty or forty feet from him. Next, he meant to try to gain possession of the knife sticking in the wall.

Hugh did not know how long he lay there. He began to think that the other man had made an escape. On hands and knees, the barrel of his revolver clenched between his strong white teeth, McClintock crawled around the box, hugging the wall closely as he moved. When he estimated he must be close to the knife, he rose to his knees. His hand groped for the hilt of the bowie. It closed on—a thick hairy wrist.

A voice screamed, and the wrist was jerked swiftly away. The owner of the knife, moved by the same desire as himself, had crept forward to recover it. McClintock plunged, putting his full weight back of the drive he crashed into the retreating enemy and flung him backward.

THEY whirled over and over. Thick thighs clamped themselves to Hugh's waist. Huge fingers closed on his throat. He threw up an arm, and at the same time a jagged bolt of pain shot through it. In the flesh of the biceps the blade of a bowie sheathed itself.

Hugh gave a desperate heave of his body and flung the man astride of him forward and to the left. Again they locked, and this time went down with Hugh on top. His wounded arm pinned down the wrist with the knife. The ruffian gouged at McClintock's eye socket with his thumb.

Dodging the thumb, Hugh found his mouth pressed against the forearm he held captive. The strong teeth that had been carrying the revolver until the two had come to grips closed on the tendons of the hairy arm. The man underneath gave a yell of pain. His fingers relaxed and opened. The handle of the bowie slipped away from them.

With his free arm the gunman tried to drag out a revolver. Hugh's fist drove savagely into the bearded face. It struck again and again, with the crushing force of a pile driver. The man, thrown back against the wall in such a way that he could not get at his six-shooter, bellowed with rage and thrashed about to avoid that flailing fist. His boot heel found a purchase against the wall and he used it to pry himself out of the corner into which he had been flung.

The fighters rolled out from the building, for the moment free of each other. A flying boot struck Hugh in the forehead and dazed him. He scrambled to his feet. His foe was legging it down the alley with all the grace of a bear in a hurry to get away.

McClintock started to pursue, then changed his mind abruptly. Instead, he quartered over the ground, and presently he found his revolver and the bowie knife. Ten minutes later he was in the office of a doctor, getting treatment for his wounded arm.

Hugh was feeding his horse next morning when a voice moved wheezily toward him through the stable.

Old Grimes is dead, that good old man,
We ne'er shall see him more,

"When's the funeral, Jim?" asked McClintock.

The fat man looked at him severely. "Young fella, I been hearin' about you. Met up with Doc Rogers. Says you got all cut up."

Byers joined them. He nodded silently to Hugh.

"Who did it?" asked Budd.

"I don't know. But I've got a guess. Is Sam Dutch living here?"

"Yep. He's the handyman of the Dodsons."

"The Dodsons are the big moguls here, from what I'm told."

"They come clost to it—own the Standard Union and the Katie Brackett, run the stageline an' the Mammoth saloon, and own the big store. Fact is, they've got title to half the lots in town."

"They're a sweet pair, with fingers in every pot of soup."

"Sure are. Run the politics, too. The sheriff's their property."

"So Dutch carries the Dodson brand. I've a notion he has my autograph stamped on his face, too, this glad mo'ning," drawled Hugh.

"Sorry to hear that. It'll mean trouble unless you leave."

"Of course, I'm not sure it was Dutch. But whoever he was he left his card behind him."

Hugh stooped and drew from his boot leg a bowie knife with a horn handle. Upon the lower part of the horn had been filed fourteen little notches. Byers examined the knife and spoke for the first time.

"Dutch claims fourteen."

"Well, I'm going to advertise it in the paper and give the owner a chance to reclaim his property."

"Won't that be a call for a showdown?" Budd asked gravely.

"I aim to call for one."

Byers nodded agreement. The simple direct way always suited him.

The fat man glanced at his partner. "We had a talk yestiddy after you left, Kid. Dan an' me is locatin' a bunch of claims on Bald Knob. Looks to us like a good chance, and we had a notion to ask you to go in with us. Needs three to handle the thing, account of claim jumpers in case we make a strike. What say we ride up Bald Knob, an' if you like the lay of the land, we'll make our locations?"

"Suits me fine."

HUGH dropped into the office of the Piode *Banner* and paid for an advertisement and for two hundred and fifty posters. The editor glanced over the copy.

"I can get the bills out this afternoon. The ad will appear in the morning."

The sheet of paper handed in by McClintock bore no evidence of being loaded with dynamite.

Upon it was printed roughly with a pencil this notice:

FOUND

In the Alley Between Turkey Creek Avenue and Monument Street
(At the Sacramento Storage Warehouse)
One Bowie Knife with Fourteen Notches
Owner Can Have Same by Applying to
Hugh McClintock

He hired an old colored man to tack up the bills on buildings, fences, and posts. Hugh also made arrangements with saloon keepers and gambling-house owners by which he was allowed to have the posters put on the walls of these resorts.

"Fourteen notches. Looks like it might be Sam Dutch's bowie you found, stranger," one bartender suggested.

"If the knife belongs to Mr. Dutch he can have it by applying for it," Hugh said.

In the middle of the afternoon Sam Dutch slouched down town with a story already prepared to account for his battered face. On a telegraph pole near the end of Turkey Creek Avenue a poster caught his eye. He read it with mixed emotions. The predominating ones were rage, hate, and apprehension. He tore the bill down and trampled it in the mud under his feet.

Half a minute later he saw a second bill, this time on the side of a store. This, too, he destroyed, with much explosive language. Between Rawhide Street and the Porphyry Lode saloon he ripped down three more notices of the finding of a bowie knife with fourteen notches. When he stopped at the bar and ordered a brandy sling the man was dangerous as a wounded grizzly.

The bartender chatted affably. "Young fellow in a while back and wanted to hang up a bill. I said, 'Sure, hop to it.' Ain't lost any hog stickers myse'f, but maybe some other gent—"

Dutch glared round, found the bill with his eyes, and dragged out a navy revolver. Three bullets crashed through the poster and the wall back of it. The killer whirled and flung the fourth shot at the man behind the bar. But that garrulous youth was fleeing wildly for safety. He had no intention whatever of being Number Fifteen.

Inside of ten minutes Piode knew that Sam Dutch was on the warpath again

and that no man who did not want a permanent home on Boot Hill would be wise to mention bowie knives to him. Later in the day, two of Dutch's satellites, Vance and Hopkins, made a tour of the town and tore down all the bills McClintock had tacked up. In addition Hugh's advertisement did not appear in the *Banner* next morning. The editor had killed it as soon as he learned that its purpose was to annoy Dutch.

Accompanied by his faithful colored bill sticker, Hugh redecorated the town with posters. Opposite Dodson & Dodson's Emporium was the Mammoth Saloon.

"Tack one on the door, Uncle Ned," said Hugh.

McClintock spoke without looking at the bill sticker. He was watching three men standing in front of the store opposite. One of these hastily retreated inside. The two who remained were Dutch and Hopkins.

The killer growled a warning. "Lay off on the bill stickin'. It don't go here."

HUGH stepped across the street. He moved evenly and without haste. "Well, well, if it ain't Sam Dutch, chief of Virginia and Aurora. Lemme see, you were takin' the stage last time I saw you." Smilingly the young man began to hum, *"Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker."* But the smile was of the lips only. His steely eyes held those of the big ruffian fast, as suddenly from his left boot leg he drew the bowie knife. "I'm tryin' to find an owner for this. Happen to know him, Mr. Dutch?"

It was a call for a showdown. In the silence which followed, all onlookers suspended their breathing. But their tension eased when Dutch chose to ignore the challenge.

"I dunno as I know more about him than anybody else," he had growled.

"No? Thought maybe you did. I found it at the corner of the alley, up the avenue. Didn't leave it there?"

"Who says I left it there?" Dutch growled.

"I'm askin' if you did."

"No-o." To Dutch it seemed that the husky monosyllable was dragged out of him by some external force.

Hugh's cold voice jeered. "Not you, then, that bushwhacked me in the alley. Got all yore fourteen on the level, of course."

"I aim to—to give every man a show," the gunman muttered.

"Good of you. Then it couldn't have been you that threw this knife at me and tried to gun me. It was dark. I couldn't make out his face, but I left the marks of my fist on it a-plenty."

A battery of eyes now focussed on the hammered face of Dutch.

"I fell down a prospect hole," the bad man explained.

"Well, don't fall down any more." Hugh told him grimly. "Next time the shaft might shoot a hole through you."

"I ain't scared of you none."

"Yes, I know you're chief here, same as you were at Virginia and Aurora. But just to show there's no hard feelings you'll help Uncle Ned tack up that poster, won't you?"

Dutch's sullen eyes battled and were beaten. The ruffian shuffled across the road, snatched a bill from the old Negro, and with a hammer drove a tack through the middle of it.

Out of the Mammoth walked a big well-dressed man with glossy hair and a small black mustache. In a glance he took in the situation.

"Tear that bill down, Dutch," he ordered.

Hugh laughed. "You hear yore master's voice, Dutch."

Dutch ripped the bill down and tore it into a dozen pieces. Ralph Dodson turned to Hugh.

"Mr. McClintock, the Mammoth is owned by me and my brother. If we want bills on the walls we'll put them there. Understand?"

Hugh bowed. "My fault, Mr. Dodson. I'll explain. This knife was sheathed two nights ago in my arm. So I'm puttin' up posters to find the owner."

"You can't put 'em up here."

"Not necessary. Everybody here knows who owns the knife—or rather who did own it. It's mine now, unless someone claims it. That all right with you, Dutch?"

The killer said nothing, and walked away. He was glad when he was out of shooting range. Experiments in psychology might easily be carried too far.

VI

JIM BUDD had a dozen reasons to offer why there must be gold in Bald

Knob. When he had finished his argument Hugh grinned. "Might as well stick up our notice here as anywhere. What say, Dan?"

Byers said, "Suits me."

"What about this fellow Singlefoot Bill who took up the claims originally —sure he's outa the country and won't make a kick?"

"Handed in his checks last year at Austin."

"Didn't he patent any of his claims?"

"I reckon. But not these. He couldn't have. There's not been enough work done on the ground. All you got to do is to use yore eyes to see this land couldn't abeen patented."

McClintock used his eyes and they corroborated his friend's opinion. Corner stakes were driven in, and four locations were taken in partnership. Each filed on several individual claims. Hugh took one in his brother's name, the rest in his own. One of these last was to be held in trust for Vicky until she became of age.

Hugh took charge of operations. He hired men, bought tools and supplies, selected the spot for the shaft, and himself tossed out the first shovel of dirt. When operations were under way he turned the management over to his partner and returned to Virginia City. The business of the firm called him. Incidentally, he wanted to see his week-old nephew, Alexander Hugh McClintock.

He went directly to his brother's house on A Street. At his knock the door was opened by a slender, young woman.

"I'm Hugh McClintock," he announced. "You're the nurse, I suppose."

The face of the young woman held surprise. "Yes, I'm the nurse. Would you like to see—Mrs. McClintock?"

"If I may."

Mollie had never looked lovelier. In the crook of her arm lay Alexander Hugh McClintock.

"Oh, Hugh, I'm so happy," she whispered. "We named him after your father and you. Scot would have it, wouldn't he, Vicky?"

The dark young woman nodded.

Hugh felt the flush dyeing his face. "Little Vicky!" he stammered. "Why, I thought—"

"Thank you for the dolls, kind sir," she said, and curtsied mockingly. Then suddenly Victoria relented. "If you want to know, I thought it was dear of you to remember the little girl away at school alone." A faint shell pink beat into the clear satiny cheeks.

"I liked that little girl. She nad a lot of git-up-an'-git."

Vicky laughed. "She was a terror, if that's what you mean. Always in mischief. Mollie will tell you that."

"Yes, but she was a tender-hearted little cyclone," smiled the older sister.

Scot came into the room. "'Lo' Hugh," he said. "How's Piodie?"

"One live camp," the younger brother answered. "Plenty of room for us there. We can put an outfit in and get all the teaming we want. One objection is that the Dodsons run the camp."

"Run it how?"

"Own the biggest store, a controlling interest in the best producing mines, the stage line, a bunch of thugs, and the sheriff. Our old friend Sam Dutch is their handy man."

"Did you see Dutch?"

"We met," Hugh answered briefly. "I bumped into Jim Budd and Dan Byers, too. We located a bunch of prospects together. I took up one in yore name, and one in trust for Vicky." Hugh flushed to the roots of his hair. He turned to the girl. "A part of that fool mistake. I kinda thought it might turn out a good prospect and if so you'd have it when you grew up."

Victoria had her own reasons for being interested in Piodie. "But of course I can't keep a claim you took up for me on a misunderstanding."

"I wish you would."

"Do you think I should?" Vicky asked Scot. "I'd like to. But I'm not going to rob you and him."

"I'd take it, Vicky," Scott told her. "Chances are we'll never do the assessment work on our own claims. We're not miners—not by business. Hugh has all he can handle without yours."

She turned to Hugh. "Then I'll take it—and thank you."

"What will you do with it now you have it?" Mollie asked.

"Do the assessment work—have a shaft dug," answered Vicky. "I have four hundred dollars left of the Virginia Dodson Fund, and, dear people, I'm going to begin earning more week after next."

"How?" asked her sister, surprised.

"I've been asked to teach school at Piodie and I accepted today."

THE McClintocks decided after all not to put in a freight outfit to Piodie. From Hugh's partners, however, word came at intervals of the progress made in sinking the shaft of the Ground Hog, which was the name they had given the mine. These messages reflected Budd's enthusiasm. He wrote in one note:

Bald Knob is sure looking up. Ralph Dodson has done made some locations above us, and two lads of the name of Jenson have staked out a claim just below and are running a tunnel in from the hillside. Look out for news of a big strike soon. We're sure right close to the vein.

Hugh smiled when he read it. In another letter the fat man mentioned a second piece of news.

Our schoolmarm here, Miss Victoria Lowell, has begun scratching dirt right lively on that claim you staked out for her. She has got a Swede on the job, but she has been out 'most every Saturday to see how tricks are. I noticed Ralph Dodson has been mighty attentive to her. You better drift ovr, Kid, and do your assessment work on that claim if you aim to get it patented in your name.

This time Hugh did not smile. He profoundly distrusted Ralph Dodson, had disliked him from the first. The fellow was a ravening wolf if he had ever seen one. On swift impulse he decided to go to Piodie.

Winter was white on the hills when Hugh started by stage. At Reno he found traffic tied up. The snow in the valleys had prevented the stage from getting through. Hugh learned that a pack train had broken trail the day before and had reached Stampede Notch in safety. From there it was working across the divide to Piodie.

He bought a pair of snowshoes and set out on the long trip. Came dusk, and after dusk, darkness. Hugh kept going. It was nearly midnight when he knocked at the door of a Mormon ranchhouse and asked shelter for the night. Healthily fatigued in every muscle, he slept like a schoolboy almost round the clock. It was noon when he awoke.

"Better stay another night," the rancher advised. "Gettin' her back up for a blizzard, looks like."

The taste of the air and the look of the sky backed his prophecy. But Hugh did not want to be tied up for several days in the hills. He decided to make a dash for Piodie. The town was not more than twenty-five miles away.

He had covered half the distance before the storm hit him hard. It began with wind, heavy sweeping gusts of it driving over the hills and into the ravines. Presently snow came, a hard sleet that pelted his face like ground glass. The temperature was falling fast. Hugh set his teeth and ploughed forward, putting his head down into the blizzard as a football player does when he is bucking the line. Sleety snow flogged him mile after mile as he wallowed on.

And presently he knew that he was lost. Somehow he had got off the trail and it was swallowed up in the bleak night. Yet not for a moment did he give up. He struggled on until, exhausted, he stumbled and fell. He lay inert for a time, then crawled up again and lurched forward. A second time his knees buckled under him. As he fell, an outstretched hand hit the wall of the house. Weakly he felt his way along the wall till he came to a door. Frozen fingers could not work the catch. He beat on the door.

It opened unexpectedly, and he plunged forward to the floor of the cabin.

VICKY had been enjoying herself tremendously at Piodie. She was not by nature a coquette. But the world was her oyster, and she meant to have a perfectly delightful time prying it open. She found that there were a good many people, at least fifty per cent of whom were of the masculine gender, ready to lend a hand at operating on the bivalve.

One of the most assiduous was Ralph Dodson. At first Vicky discouraged his attentions. For one thing, he was the brother of a man she had detested all her life. She did not want to have anything whatever to do with a Dodson. After what had taken place it was not decent that the families should have any relationship at all.

One day however, an accident took place that produced in her a certain unwilling admiration of Ralph Dodson. Near the schoolhouse was an abandoned

mine tunnel, poorly timbered, in which she had forbidden the children to play. Little Johnny Haxtun, playing hide and seek, ventured into it and in the darkness stumbled against a rotten post. At his weight the support crumbled. There was a cave-in, and Johnny lay crushed beneath a mass of rock and timber.

Among the first of the rescuers to arrive was Ralph Dodson. He told the young school teacher, who was standing there white and shaken, to get a doctor and have first-aid relief at hand in case Johnny should be alive when he was released. Then, axe in hand, he led the men into the tunnel. It was dangerous work. The fallen timbering had to be cut and dug away.

At any moment an avalanche of rock and dirt might pour down from above and kill them all. Dodson did not shirk. He stood up to his job deep in the tunnel, regardless of the little slides trickling down that might at any instant precipitate a hundred tons upon him. The worst of it was that the more dirt and jammed timbers were removed, the greater the peril of a second cave-in.

Johnny was still alive. A couple of crossed timbers had protected him from the weight of rock and dirt. Vicky heard his whimpering and came into the tunnel to comfort him. But Dodson would have none of that. He ordered the girl into the open instantly.

"This isn't a woman's job. Get out," he told her curtly.

Perhaps she resented his manner at the moment, but when half an hour later he emerged from the tunnel carrying the maimed body of the little fellow she remembered only that he had risked his life to save Johnny.

Nor could she forget it when he called that evening at her boarding house, ostensibly to tell her that the doctor had set Johnny's broken leg and found no other injury from the accident.

"It's going to be hard on his mother. You know she's a widow and takes in washing," Vicky said. "I wonder if we couldn't give a school entertainment for her benefit."

"That won't be necessary," he said promptly. "It's partly my fault the accident happened. As school clerk I should have had the mouth of the tunnel boarded up. I'm going to pay all the bills and see that Mrs. Haxtun doesn't lose anything by it."

Victoria felt a glow at her heart. It always did her good to find out that people were kinder and more generous than she had supposed.

DODSON made the most of the opportunity chance had given him. He used it as a wedge to open up a friendship with the girl. She was still reluctant, but this was based on some subconscious impulse. All the fine generosity in her was in arms to be fair to him regardless of his brother.

As soon as he learned that she had a claim on Bald Knob that she wanted to develop, Dodson put his experience at her service. He helped her arrange with a man to do the actual assessment work and he went over the ground with her to choose the spot for the shaft. Afterwards he kept an eye on Oscar Sorenson to see that he did a fair day's work for the pay he received.

On holidays Vicky usually walked or rode out to her claim to see how Sorenson was getting along. She was pretty apt to meet Dodson on the way to Bald Knob or else superintending operations there. Two or three times he came down to her prospect at noon and they strolled up a little gulch to pick wild flowers and eat their lunch together. He had the gift of talk, the manner of a man of the world, and she found his company interesting and agreeable.

"You'll not be going to the mine today, dearie," Mrs. Budd said to Vicky one Saturday morning when the hills were white with a blanket of snow.

"But I promised Oscar to bring his mail and some tobacco. Besides, I want to see how he's been getting along."

"Then you'll come home early, won't you? There's a lot more snow up in the sky yet, and by night we're likely to have some of it."

Vicky did not stay long at the mine. She did not like the look of the sky. The wind was rising, too, and the temperature falling. She thought for a moment of asking Sorenson to go back to town with her, but dismissed the idea promptly. It did not agree with her view of the self-reliance she was cultivating.

By the time she had passed the Dodson properties the wind had risen to a gale that almost lifted her from her feet. A stinging sleet swept into her face and blinded her. She found it difficult to make out the way, and before she

reached the foot of the slope below Bald Knob she stopped. In the comparative shelter of a little draw she stopped to decide what she had better do. It was still a mile and a half to town. There was a little cabin in the next draw where Ralph slept when he did not care to go to town after spending the day on his Bald Knob property. It was usually stocked with supplies of food and fuel. No doubt it would be unoccupied now.

She put her head down into the white blizzard. Three minutes later she pushed open the door of the cabin and walked in. A man sitting at a table jumped to his feet with a startled oath. Vicky was as much taken aback as he.

"I thought the cabin was empty," she explained. "I'm Victoria Lowell, and I've been up to my claim."

The man's look was half a scowl and half a leer. He was a big round-shouldered ruffian. There floated in her mind a vague recollection of having seen him before.

On the table were a whisky bottle and a glass. The man indicated them with a sweep of his hand. "Have a nip. Warm you up, miss."

"No, thanks. I'm all right."

HER host pushed a chair toward her. As soon as she sat down her head began to nod and her eyelids closed. With a start she brought herself awake again.

"Didn't know I was so done up," she murmured.

"'S all right. Sleep if you want to, miss," the man told her.

Not for an hour or more did she open her eyes again. The table was set for a meal.

"Come an' get it, miss," the man said gruffly.

Vicky discovered that she was hungry. She drank the coffee he poured out and ate the stew he ladled from the kettle. He did not eat with her.

"If the storm would break I'd try to reach town," she said presently.

"Hmp! Guess you don't know a Nevada blizzard." Again he looked at her, a leer on his heavy face. "You're liable to have to put up with old Sam for quite a spell, missie."

Vicky did not answer. Her eyes were meeting his and the blood crept into her cheeks. There was a furtive sinister menace between his narrowed lips as he poured a drink from the whisky bottle.

"How!" he said, lifting the glass toward her, and stopped suddenly at a heavy pounding on the door.

Victoria was at the door instantly. She flung it open. A man lurched forward and crumpled up on the floor.

With a swift movement of her supple body Vicky was on her knees beside the man. She gasped as she recognized Hugh McClintock. Over her shoulder she called to the big man at the table.

"Help me carry him nearer the fire. He's most frozen."

The fellow shambled forward and stooped down. As he did so he ripped out a savage oath. With the sweep of an arm he dragged the girl to her feet and hurled her back to the wall.

"Gotcha. Gotcha good an' right. I'm gonna stomp the life outa you. Gonna put my heel on yore throat an' crack yore spine. Un'erstand?"

Victoria knew the ruffian now. The girl's arm rested on a shelf, in the same position where it had fallen when she had been hurled back. Her fingers touched something cold.

"You first. Yore brother next," the voice of Dutch went on. "I been waitin' a mighty long time, an' I gotcha at last. Sure have." His gloating was horrible. It sent chills through Victoria's blood. Her fingers spasmodically closed—on the ivory handle of a revolver. "Don't-cha hear me?" Dutch went on. "Beg me to let you go. Crawl over an' lick my boots. Maybe I'll go easy on you like you two dern fools done with me."

A jangle of hideous laughter accompanied his words. He kicked his opponent in the side. Meanwhile, it was clear that he was working himself up for murder. One thought dominated Vicky, drove out all others. She must save Hugh McClintock. Noiselessly she crept forward and pushed the revolver into Dutch's back.

"If you move I'll shoot you," she said hoarsely.

Three slow taps rose from the floor. Dutch gasped. Those taps had always heralded disaster for him.

Vicky drew a knife from his boot and a revolver from the belt he was wearing. She dropped them on the floor.

"Walk to the door," she ordered. "Go outside. If you come in before I call you I'll shoot holes in you."

Dutch whined. "You wouldn't drive me out into the storm after I done took you in an' fed you, miss. I was jest a-funnin' about him. Jest my li'l way."

"Go on," she told him inexorably. "Now."

He went. She closed the door behind him.

McCLINTOCK crept toward the fire. Vicky gathered the weapons and put them down beside her. Then she took one of his hands in hers and began to rub it to restore circulation. Presently a fist beat on the door.

"Shall I let him in?" the girl asked.

Hugh picked up one of the revolvers.

"Yes, let him in," he said.

Vicky took the second revolver. The knife Hugh thrust into one of his boot legs.

The girl opened the door and Dutch slouched in. He shuffled up to the fire, taking the opposite side to the one occupied by his guests. Silently he glared at them. But for the moment he could do nothing. They were armed. He was not.

Exhausted by his long battle with the storm, Hugh could hardly keep his eyes open. Vicky whispered in his ear: "Cuddle down in the chair and sleep a while. I'll watch him."

Hugh shook his head. No, that would never do. But even as he was firmly resolving to stay awake his eyelids drooped. Presently he was sound asleep.

For hours the storm continued unabated. Meanwhile, from opposite sides of the fireplace, the desperado and the girl watched each other. But at last the glow of heat formed an alliance with Vicky's fatigue. She, too, began to nod, her wariness lulled by the stertorous breathing of the big huddled figure opposite. And then suddenly she was conscious of Dutch tiptoeing toward her. He crouched for the leap as her fingers busied themselves with the revolver.

The roar of the explosion filled the cabin. The weight of the plunging man flung Vicky to the floor. She lay face down, breathless, oppressed by his huge bulk. The six-shooter had gone clattering beyond her reach.

The weight lifted from her. She heard scuffling feet and heavy grunts as she recovered the weapon and fled to the wall. When she turned it was to see the butt of a six-gun rising and falling. There was a gasp, a groan, and one of the struggling figures sank down.

The one still standing was Hugh McClintock.

"Is—is he dead?" Vicky asked, awed.

"No such luck. I tapped his bean with my gun." He stooped over the prostrate man and turned him on his back. "Hello! Here's a wound in his shoulder. You must have hit him."

"Oh, I hope not," Vicky cried.

"Probably saved my life," Hugh told her quietly. "And you haven't killed him. He'll be all right in a week or two. Good work, Vicky. Well, he'll not trouble us any more. Have to dress the wound, though. If it makes you sick to—"

"It won't," she cried eagerly. "Let me help. What can I do?"

"Rummage through that drawer. Find clean shirts or rags. Tear one into strips," Hugh told her.

McClintock brought water and washed the wound. His enemy permitted it, sulky as a sore bear. Vicky passed the bandages as Hugh needed them. He noticed once that the blood had washed from her face and left it colorless.

"You'd better sit down," he said gently. "I can manage alone."

"No," she told him firmly.

But afterwards, when Dutch had been ordered to lie down on the cot by the window, Hugh ordered Vicky, too, to sleep.

When she woke it was morning. The storm had passed. Hugh was cooking at the fireplace. The desperado was sleeping noisily and restlessly.

"Come an' git it," Hugh called, just as he would have done to another man.

"When can we go?" she asked as he poured coffee for her.

"Soon as we've eaten. Some job to buck the drifts to town but we'll make it."

"And him?"

"I'll notify his friends to come and look after him."

Youth calls to youth. Vicky looked at Hugh with a new interest. She had always admired his clean strength, the wholesome directness of his character. Today her eyes saw him differently. He belonged to her generation, not that of Mollie and Scot. They could not be the same hereafter. They would have to know each other better—or not at all.

VII

IT was generally recognized that the Republicans would carry Nevada that year, and the chief local interest centered in the race for the nomination of that party for secretary of state. In this contest Scot McClintock was challenging Ralph Dodson.

Scot went out into the camps and the agricultural valleys to make a personal campaign. It was so successful that his opponent became alarmed. Dodson came out in the *Enterprise* with a savage attack on his rival in which he accused him of being an ex-gambler and a brawler. Scot kept his temper and made no counter charges. Next, evil stories began to appear concerning Mollie and Scot. They became so numerous that at last Scot in a speech full of eloquence referred to the traducers of his wife as snakes in the grass who dared not come into the open.

The bitterness became acute. Robert Dodson, still full of venom and hatred, whispered in the ears of killers. The word was passed around quietly that McClintock might be shot down any time.

At Carson the killers struck.

Scot had addressed an enthusiastic meeting, after which, with Hugh beside him, the speaker had returned to the Ormsby House. The younger brother was putting up at the house of a friend. After Hugh had left, Scot found that he was out of cigars, and stepped down to the barroom to get one. Baldy Green, the old stagedriver, was sitting by the office stove. The two fell into talk and Scot sat down to smoke his cigar with the old-timer.

"You betcha, Colonel," the stage driver was saying. "If us old-timers had the say-so we'd elect you by a mile. That slick scalawag Dodson, why he—he—"

Scot's first warning came from Baldy's sudden consternation. Almost simultaneously came the click McClintock knew from of old. The crash of heavy thunder filled the room. Scot sagged in his seat, the curly head falling forward heavily on the chest.

"Got him. Got him good, Sam," an exultant voice announced hoarsely through the smoke.

A hulking figure slouched forward cautiously. No sign of life showed in the lax body.

"Always said I'd git him." Dutch reversed his revolver and struck the fallen head savagely with the butt. He struck again and broke the hammer of his revolver. "Out this way," he said, and pushed through the swinging doors to the bar.

Despite the heavy blows McClintock's senses cleared almost instantly and his hand found his revolver. He was cocking it as the second assassin vanished through the swing doors. One shot was enough to kill the desperado Hopkins instantly.

Baldy knelt beside his friend. "Did they get you, old-timer?" he asked.

"I'm still kicking. Send for Hugh," the wounded man gasped.

Half an hour later Hugh stood beside the bedside of his brother. The doctor had told Hugh that he would not live till morning.

"I'm going—to—make it," Scott said faintly. "Wire—for—Mollie. Tell her —not to—worry."

Mollie came down from Virginia. At the end of forty-eight hours Scot was in a high fever, but his strength was unabated. The fever broke.

"It's all right, sweetheart. I'll make it sure," he promised Mollie. "Where's Hugh?"

"He left yesterday to 'tend to some business. Said he'd be back today or tomorrow."

SCOT thought this over, with a troubled face. He could guess what this important business was. Indeed, Hugh had still been at the bedside of his brother when he began to make plans. Already he knew that Sam Dutch had left town. Word had come to him that two horsemen in a desperate hurry had clattered down the street from Doc Benton's stable. They had disappeared in the darkness. But the man who had seen them go had not recognized the companion of Dutch.

Hugh went immediately to the sheriff. "There's one thing you can do, Phil," he said. "Swear me in as a special deputy. I'm goin' out to get Dutch."

"To bring him back here, you mean?" asked the officer.

McClintock's eyes were inscrutable. "Of course."

"Alive?" the sheriff added.

"Alive," agreed Hugh.

The sheriff shrugged. "All right,

son, I'll swear you in."

Meanwhile Hugh kept the wires hot with messages. He telegraphed friends at Virginia, Reno, Piodie, and Genoa, asking for news of the fugitives. His suspicion fastened on Robert Dodson as the man who was riding with Dutch. But none of the answers to his telegrams brought Hugh the message he hoped for. The fugitives had not been seen at Virginia, Genoa, or Reno, though it was quite possible they might have reached or passed through any of these places unnoticed. He decided to play what would nowadays be called a hunch. The natural place for them to go was Piodie, and it was there he meant to look for them.

When he reached Piodie, he made straight for the Pony Express Corral.

Byers was there alone. "How's Scott?" he asked.

"Bad," said Hugh. "What about Dutch?"

"Got in last night."

"Dodson with him?"

"Ralph's in Virginia. The other one's here."

"Know where he is now?"

"At the Katie Brackett. Rode right out there."

"I'm goin' up after him," Hugh said quietly.

"With that gang round him?"

"Maybe I'll catch him alone."

"And maybe not." Byers stepped to the wall and took down from a peg a belt to which was attached a revolver. As he did so a man burst through the doorway.

It was Jim Budd. For a few moments he stood panting, unable to find his breath for speech.

"What's up, Jim?" asked Hugh, his eyes anxious.

The fat man wheezed out an answer. "H-heck to pay! The Katie Brackett's afire, an' the day shift's down in her, caught in a drift."

The superintendent of the mine was calling for volunteer rescuers just as Hugh and Dan reached the shaft house. McClintock hid his shotgun under a pile of lumber and stepped forward. The cage was a double decker. There was a rush of men to get on the lower floor. They knew well enough the danger that faced them, but it is a risk a brave miner is always willing to take for the lives of doomed companions.

THE lower compartment dropped and the second level was even with the ground. The superintendent stepped into the cage. Byers crowded in next. Others followed, then the engineer moved a lever and the cage dropped. Hugh heard someone beside him say, "I hear Dodson's caught in a drift."

Carstairs, the superintendent, answered.

"Yes, Dutch is with him. They went to look at that new vein we struck yesterday."

The fire was in the north drift. Carstairs led the men forward cautiously. Hugh was at the nozzle of the hose they were dragging. He kept a stream playing on the rock and the charred timber. Presently he fell back, overcome by the intense heat, and Carstairs took his place.

Byers succeeded the superintendent at the apex of the attack.

Steadily the rescuers gained ground. Every few minutes they relayed each other.

"The crosscut's just ahead," Carstairs announced at last. "Two volunteers to search the crosscut while the rest hold back the fire," he called.

"I'll go," said a Maine lumberjack.

"Same here," added Hugh.

The lumberjack followed Hugh into the side tunnel. They pushed forward some distance, then stumbled over a body.

"How many in here?" Hugh called.

"Eleven."

"Where are the others?"

"Dead."

"The rest of you able to travel?"

"Yes."

Hugh heard the sound of footsteps stumbling toward him. Men came abreast of him and went past. He counted them—eleven.

When Hugh reached the foot of the shaft the first thing he did was to find the revolver he had hidden beneath a car; the next was to look over the rescued men for the one he wanted. He found him, standing beside Robert Dodson close to the cage.

The car shot upward. Hugh drew something from his pocket. There was a click, a second click, a furious, raucous oath of rage like the bellow of a maddened bull. Hugh had slipped handcuffs on the thick wrists of Dutch and locked them.

ABOVE ground, McClintock recovered his shotgun from its hiding place. "We'll be movin' down to town," he told his captive.

Dutch shouted one word, "Dodson."

Dodson swung around, and at the first glance understood the situation. He turned pale and crouched behind Carstairs, shaking like an aspen.

"Don't let him kill me," he begged.

Hugh spoke, his voice cold and hard. "I'm not on the shoot today, Dodson. I'm here to take Dutch back to Carson with me. The yellow wolf shot my brother in the back."

"He's aimin' to take me there to be killed," Dutch cried out. "You boys won't stand for that."

"Sure we won't." A gunman stepped forward briskly. "You can't pull that over here, McClintock. You don't own this camp, an' you can't play chief here."

Two men lined up with Hugh, one on each side of him. The man on his right was a whale of a fat man. Deftly he slid McClintock's revolver from its holster. The second ally was a small wiry fellow. From a grimy blackened face keen eyes peered intently.

"Don't run on the rope, Sloan," the fat man said. "We're with the kid on this. He's a deputy sheriff, an' it'll sure be 'Let's gather at the river' for some of you anxious gents if you overplay yore hand."

"I came here as an officer with a warrant to get this man. Three days ago he shot down from behind the bes man in Nevada, Scot McClintock. Most of you know my brother, a first-class citizen and soldier. He ran this scalawag out of Virginia, and he made the mistake of not killin' him right then. I came here to arrest a fifteen-times murderer. How about that, boys?"

The crowd was with Hugh at once. The Dodsons controlled the camp. A good many of these men were dependent upon them financially. But even Ralph Dodson was hardly popular. As for Dutch, their camp bully, everybody feared him and nobody trusted him. In addition, Byers, the man on Hugh's left, had been one of the rescuers. The fat man had volunteered three times and been rejected.

"His warrant goes," someone shouted.

"Sure does," echoed another voice.

The Maine lumberjack lined up beside Hugh, an axe shaft in his hand. He had observed that Dodson and Sloan were gathering the camp toughs. Sloan and his crowd moved forward.

From out of the crowd a girl darted, light as a deer. She stood directly in front of Hugh, face to face with the gunmen.

"Don't you dare touch him," she cried. "It was my brother-in-law this—this man killed. He did shoot him from behind. I've had a letter. It was murder."

A murmur of resentment passed like a wave through the crowd. They knew the slim young school teacher told the truth.

"Don't I know?" she went on ardently. "Wasn't I there when he tried to kill Hugh here—and Hugh frozen from the blizzard so that he couldn't lift a hand to help himself? Oh, he's—he's a terrible man."

"He is that," an Irishwoman's voice lifted. "But glory be, there's wan man not afraid to comb his whiskers for him. An' it's a brave colleen y'are to spake up for your fine young man like that."

A roar of approval went up into the air. Men surged forward, and women, too, to express their gratitude by standing between this young man and the Dodson faction. Vicky, rosy with embarrassment, vanished in the crowd.

"I reckon you don't get a chance to use yore scatter gun this trip," Budd said with a grin. "Prospects look bilious for this killer you got rounded up. Sure do. I never did see such a son-of-a-gun as you, Kid. Me, I'd abet an ounce of gold against a dollar Mex you never would awalked into Piodie an' took Sam Dutch out. But that there miracle is what you're gonna pull off, looks like."

Evidently the gunmen knew better than to challenge public opinion at present. They drew off to the mine boarding house and left Hugh free to return to Piodie with his prisoner.

VIII

VICKY, in her bedroom at Mrs. Budd's, flogged herself with a whip of scorn. She had acted on imperative impulse, just as she used to do when she was a little girl. Her cheeks flamed again when she recalled what the Irish-

woman had said. Of course! Everybody would think she had done it because she was in love with Hugh McClintock.

Mrs. Budd knocked on the door. "Breakfast ready, deary. And Mr. McClintock is here. He wants to thank you."

"I'll be down presently," Vicky said.

She came to breakfast stormy-eyed. Hugh rose to meet her from his seat next to the door. "I'm mighty grateful, Vicky," he said.

"Oh, I didn't want them to take that devil from you," she explained. "I'll not be satisfied till he's hanged. What have you heard about Scot?"

"A telegram last night and one this mo'ning. He's still holdin' his own, the doctors say."

"Don't let these buckwheats get cold," Mrs. Budd said cheerfully, bustling in with a hot plateful.

Jim Budd was sitting in the kitchen guarding the prisoner, but Byers, Hugh, and Vicky, with an occasional word from Mrs. Budd, discussed plans for getting Dutch to Carson. Both Hugh and Byers were exhausted. The night through which they had just come had been a terrible one.

"You two had better go upstairs and sleep," Vicky said. "Mr. Budd'll watch your prisoner till night."

"And what then?" asked Hugh. "We can't just saddle up and hit the trail for Carson. Never in the world get there. By this time they've wired to Ralph Dodson. He's on the job at the other end of the line."

"I can telegraph to Carson for help and have friends come and meet you."

"That would mean a pitched battle. Can't have that."

"Oh, well, you go to bed and sleep," Vicky said imperatively. "We can decide later about how you're going to reach Carson."

Within a few minutes both men, and Dutch, too, were sound asleep. It was late in the afternoon when Hugh awoke. He found Vicky waiting for him in the sitting room.

"I'll leave tonight," he said.

"Yes. That would be best."

"Is the house watched?"

"Yes."

"Can't help it. I'll go soon as I've eaten."

"I'm going, too," she told him. "I ought to be with Mollie."

"You come tomorrow—not today. There may be trouble."

"No, there won't be any trouble—and I'm going with you."

"I'm not going alone, you know," he explained. "Dutch travels with me."

"Then there'll be three of us." She stepped to the kitchen door, but before she opened it mirth bubbled in her face. "Come in, Mr. Dutch. We start on a long journey about dusk."

The man who shuffled into the room was Jim Budd made up for the part of the desperado. Hugh's puzzled eyes asked a question of Vicky.

"We three are going after supper," she explained. "Their lookout is over at Schmidt's blacksmith shop. Mr. Budd will have his hands tied. Of course he'll think it's your prisoner."

"Good enough," agreed Hugh. "But haven't you forgot one small detail? The real Dutch has got to go to Carson. That's what I came here for—to get him."

"He'll go. As soon as the sheriff's posse has clattered past after us, Mr. Byers and your prisoner will take a very quiet walk up the gulch and round Bald Knob. Horses are waiting there, your friend the lumberjack with the axe handle took them. He and Mr. Byers will ride across the hills with the prisoner to Carson."

Hugh looked at the eager, vital girl with frank admiration. "You're a wonder, Vicky. But they may stop us right when we start up the canyon. Then they'll know Jim here isn't Dutch, and the fat will certainly be in the fire."

"No, Hugh, we've had a message from a friend in the enemy's camp. Irish Tom Carberry. Here it is."

Hugh read the scribbled words.

Tell McClintock to look out for trouble near Bell's Camp. He'll be caught between two fires if he tried to take Dutch with him.

A Friend

"What makes you think Carberry wrote this?" asked Hugh.

"Ned described the man who gave it to him," Budd explained. "He's sure a ringer for Carberry—even to that red shirt he wears."

"Might be Tom," agreed Hugh. "My vote saved his life from the vigilantes at Aurora."

"You see we're safe till we reach Bell's Camp," interpreted Vicky. "The sheriff and the gunmen he appoints as deputies will follow behind us and we'll be driven into the arms of those who come to meet us. That's the plan."

"All right," Hugh conceded. "Have it yore own way, good people. Vicky, you're road boss of this outfit. When do we start?"

Vicky dimpled with delight. "Right after supper."

THE miles of their journey stole the hours. It was far past midnight when Hugh turned to Vicky with a smile not free from anxiety.

"Bell's Camp just ahead," he said. "Don't make any mistake. When we're ordered to halt, all our hands go straight up in the air."

He had hardly spoken when from behind rocks on both sides of the road men rose suddenly and covered the party with rifles.

"Stick 'em up. Reach for the sky," a voice ordered curtly.

Six hands went up instantly, almost as though they had been waiting for the cue.

"You may pull yours down, Dutch," the voice went on.

Hugh spoke suavely, "Must be some mistake, gentlemen. Mr. Dutch isn't with us."

"Not with you! What's the use of lying? Speak up, Dutch."

"If you're meanin' me, my name's Budd—Jim Budd from Piodie," spoke up the fat man.

The challenger stepped close and stared up at his face. "Where's Dutch? What have you done with him?" he demanded.

"Why, we left him at Piodie," Budd said with bland innocence. "Is this here a hold-up, or what?"

Vicky spoke now. "Isn't that Mr. Dodson—Mr. Ralph Dodson?" she asked quietly.

"Miss Lowell! What are you doing here?"

"I might ask that about you, Mr. Dodson," she retorted. "I'm going with Mr. McClintock and Mr. Budd to Carson. Haven't you heard that two ruffians tried to murder Colonel McClintock?"

After just an instant's hesitation Dodson spoke gravely. "Yes, I've heard, Miss Lowell. Believe me, I have been greatly distressed. If there's anything I can do—"

"You can help us bring to justice the desperado who escaped."

Dodson chose his words with care. "I really don't know the facts, Miss Lowell. I can't talk about that because I don't know anything about it. We're here under orders from the sheriff at Piodie. He sent us word that someone was attempting illegally to abduct Sam Dutch. There seems to be some mistake."

"So that it remains for you to apologize for having drawn guns on us," Vicky said tartly. "Then we'll move on."

Dodson flushed. "I'm certainly sorry if we alarmed you, Miss Lowell. Under the circumstances—"

Hugh spoke quietly and evenly. "We'll say goodnight, Mr. Dodson, that is, if you're quite satisfied we're not concealing Mr. Dutch about our persons."

Dodson fell back with a wave of his hand. The rifles were lowered. In a moment the travelers were on their way. The mine owner looked after them with a frown on his brow. He was not satisfied. He believed he had been tricked, but for the life of him he could not tell how.

HUGH and Vicky found Scot still defying the predictions of the doctors by hanging on to life. Within a few minutes Hugh was in the saddle again and on the way to meet Byers and his prisoner. Before morning they had Dutch behind bars in the Carson jail.

Meanwhile, in the political campaign, sinister whispers passed from mouth to mouth. Scot McClintock had broken up the home of Robert Dodson. The disgraceful affair at Carson showed him to be a desperate man, in the same class as the men Hopkins and Dutch. This was hinted in veiled language by the press.

But Nevada was young. It understood men like the McClintocks and it liked them. Ralph Dodson was of a type it neither knew nor wanted to know. The verdict was unmistakable. Scot McClintock was nominated on the first ballot by a large majority.

Meanwhile, sulky and morose, Dutch waited for deliverance. The weeks passed. The Dodsons sent him word to say nothing, that when the time came they would set him free. But the time

had not come for that yet.

One night Dutch was pacing up and down his cell when the guard appeared. He moved forward to the door.

"Gimme a chew, Hank," he said ingratiatingly.

"Sure, Sam."

The jailer dived into his right hip pocket, found a plug of tobacco, and handed it through the grating to his prisoner. Dutch caught the man's wrist and twisted it down against the iron bar of the lattice.

"Gimme yore six-shooter. . . . Now unlock the door. Let out a squawk an' I'll pump lead into you."

The jailer obeyed orders. Dutch hustled him into the cell, then tied and gagged him. He took the keys, went downstairs, unlocked the outer door, and walked into the night a free man.

He was hardly outside, when a young woman passed on the other side of the street. It was Victoria Lowell. His eyes lit with a cunning malice. Softly he padded down the street after her until she turned into a dark side street.

"How are you, m'dear? Didn't expect to meet up with old Sam, did you?" His leer was hideous.

She quickened her step. His arm shot out and his great hand closed on her wrist.

"Let me go," she ordered, and her voice shook. "I'm going home. Don't you dare stop me."

"Home. So you're going home?" His slow thoughts struck another tangent. "Good enough, I'll trail along an' see you get there safe, missie. Like to say 'How-d'ye-do' to Colonel McClintock whilst I'm there. Home it is, m'dear. Where do you live?"

Her thoughts flew. Since he did not know where the house was she could mark time at least.

"This way," she said, and led him away from the house where Scot was lying in bed.

They came to a house, set a little back from the road in a young orchard. Victoria opened the gate and they walked in. Her brain had registered an inspiration. Straight to the porch she went.

Dutch warned her. "No tricks, missie. You lead right into the room where he is an' don't say a word. Un'erstand?"

"Yes."

Vicky, still with his hateful fingers about her wrist, opened the door and walked into the house. At her touch a second door swung. Before Dutch could recover from the surprise of what he saw, he had moved forward with the girl into a room.

A man was sitting at a desk writing. He looked up, astonished at this interruption. The man was Father Marston.

"He wants me to take him to Scot," Vicky said simply.

Her explanation sufficed. Dutch, a many times killer, stood before him with a drawn revolver in his hand.

The minister rose. He had served through the war as a chaplain and the spirit of a soldier was in him.

"Hands off, Dutch!"

"Where's Scot McClintock?" the badman demanded.

"We'll take that up when you've turned Miss Lowell loose. Now get your hands off her."

The bully did not dare to shoot down Father Marston. The fingers loosened from Vicky's arm.

"Sam Dutch," the parson said. "You're as black hearted a villain as ever I knew. If you've got one redeeming trait I don't know what it is. Now, listen. You're not going to murder Scot McClintock. You're going to walk with me straight to Doc Benton's stable. You'll arrange with him for a horse. And you'll drop into the saddle and light a shuck out of Carson."

"Who says I'll do all that?" Dutch sneered.

"I say it. If you don't I'll rouse the town and hang you in front of the jail. That's a promise made before God, Dutch. I'll keep it, so help me."

The badman threw up his hands. "All right. You got me, Parson. I'll light a shuck."

They moved outside. At the gate Father Marston stopped. "You run along home, Vicky," he said. "See you later."

She left them, reluctantly. Dutch and the parson took a side street that led toward Benton's stable.

A man came down the street walking as though he loved it. He was singing softly the words of a trail song:

Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, little dogies, roll—

Marston's heart lost a beat. He felt rather than saw the figure of the man

at his side grow tense as it crouched. Steel flashed in the moonlight. The preacher struck at a hair-matted wrist as the gun roared.

The singer stopped in his tracks. With incredible quickness he dragged out a revolver and fired. Dutch groaned and clutched at his breast. He sank down, still firing.

The thunder of the guns died. Marston ran to the fallen man and knelt down beside him. He tore open the coat and vest. A single look was sufficient. Three bullets had torn into the great barrel-like trunk of his body. The body stiffened suddenly, then relaxed limply. Dutch was dead.

The two men rose and looked at each other. Hugh McClintock spoke first.

"I had to do it, Father. It was Dutch or me."

"Yes, you had to do it. I saw what he was doing just in time to hit his arm."

"I reckon that saved me. I can't thank you."

"Don't thank me, Hugh. Thank God." He looked soberly down at the dead man. "There, but for His grace, lies Hugh McClintock."

Not long after, Scot McClintock was elected Secretary of State by the largest majority in the history of Nevada.

IX

FROM Piodie came a telegram to Hugh. It was signed by Jim Budd, newly elected sheriff of that county, and said, THE GROUND HOG IS ON A RAMPAGE. BIG STRIKE. COME AT ONCE.

Hugh found Piodie buzzing with excitement. The strike on Bald Knob aroused keen interest because this was a new field.

"I want to tell you that yore claims would have been jumped before this," Sheriff Budd told Hugh with a wise nod of his head, "if it hadn't been that you McClintocks are such darned go-getters nobody wanted to take a chance."

"How about Miss Lowell's claim?" said Hugh.

"Well, she's done a heap of work on it. I don't reckon any one could hardly get away with it, her bein' so popular here, too, an' a lone, defenseless girl at that. But it's different with you an' Scot. Someone with guts is apt to jump them claims any minute."

Hugh dropped around to the schoolhouse that afternoon to walk home with the lone girl who was popular.

They walked home together along a path that led to the main street of the town. "Isn't it splendiferous news about the Ground Hog? I'm so glad you've made a strike," Vicky congratulated Hugh.

"I wanted to speak with you about that. There's some danger of our claims being jumped—not the Ground Hog, but those on which we have been doing only assessment work. Byers and I looked over yours. I don't see how yours can be in any danger. You've done too much developing. But you can never be sure."

"I've paid out nearly three hundred dollars for wages," she said quickly.

"Yes, I know. Did you take receipts?"

"No. Ought I?"

"Better get 'em. What are your plans?"

"A dozen people have been around to ask me for leases. I hardly know what to do. What do you think?"

"The more men you get working there the better. You can't afford to pay wages, so you'd better sign a lease. I wouldn't give it to a single person, but to two or three in partnership. Tie 'em up tight. Have a good lawyer make the papers out, so that there isn't anything left in doubt. Be sure you get the proper terms."

"And good leasers," she suggested.

"Yes, that's important."

"Will you go with me when we're arranging the lease?" she asked, a little shyly.

"Glad to, of course."

THEY talked of Scot and his recovery to health, of Mollie's joy in her baby, and of young Alexander Hugh himself, who was developing wonderful intelligence, if the letters of his mother were worthy of credence. At last they reached the Budd house. Mrs. Budd met them at the front door and hustled Hugh quickly inside. "I've just had a message from Jim," she explained. "There's a warrant out for your arrest. It's for killin' Sam Dutch, I expect. Who ever heard the like? But Jim's got to serve it. So I'm to hide you in the attic. When he comes he'll look for you and won't find you."

"What's the use? If they've got a warrant out for me they'll get me sooner or later. The verdict of the coroner's jury was that Dutch came to his death at the hands of God. It's some trick."

"That's what Jim says. It's a trick. And the Dodsons are back of it. So Jim says for you to lie low and see what happens. I'll have Bennie watch the road so as to give you time to get upstairs if any one comes. I expect you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry when Mrs. Budd gives me an invitation to eat," he answered, smiling.

Hugh did very well on steak, roast wild duck, potatoes, home-made bread, honey, and dried-apple pie. Mrs. Budd was urging on him another piece of pie when Bennie ran in.

"Dad's comin' down the road with two other men," he shouted.

Hugh retired to the garret.

Sheriff Budd came wheezing into the house followed by his deputies. "Seen anything of Hugh McClintock?" he asked his wife.

"Where would I see him? I haven't been out of the house," his plump helpmate answered tartly.

"Well, I got to search the house. Some folks seem to think he's here." He turned to the deputies. "Look through the kitchen and the hen house, boys," he ordered. "Then we'll move upstairs. I don't reckon he could be here without Mrs. Budd knowin' it. But the way to make sure is to look."

They presently trooped upstairs. While the deputies were searching the bedrooms Budd puffed up to the garret. In order to establish his identity he sang a solo:

Old Grimes is dead, that good old man.

The sheriff opened the door of the attic and stepped in. Hugh was straddling a chair with his elbows across the back of it. He grinned at his friend.

Budd shut the door hurriedly. "No use tellin' the boys you're here."

"True enough. What's up, Jim?"

"I dunno. The Dodsons want you locked up while the fireworks are on."

"Why not oblige 'em. You can fix it so I escape when I'm needed."

But Budd had opinions of his own on that point. "No, sir. While I'm sheriff I'll be a sure enough one. Onct you git behind the bars you're my prisoner an' I'm an officer sworn to keep you there. But now I'm old Jim Budd an' you're Kid McClintock."

"All right. Have it yore own way, old-timer."

The sheriff went downstairs and reported to his men.

"Some of us ce'tainly would have seen him if he'd been in this house," he concluded.

One of the deputies grinned. It chanced that he had heard voices in the attic.

"Some of us sure would," he agreed affably. "Me, I ain't lost McClintock awful bad anyhow."

MISS LOWELL, schoolmarm, sat in the parlor of her boarding house and corrected spelling papers. Across the lamplit table from her was Hugh McClintock. He was browsing through a volume of poems written by the man who had been for two decades and still was the world's most popular philosopher of progress. The book was Vicky's and she handed it to him with a word of youth's extravagant praise.

"I think Tennyson's the greatest poet that ever lived," she told him.

He had just begun *The Charge of the Light Brigade* when Mrs. Budd pushed her head into the room. "Mr. Ralph Dodson's here an' would like to see you—on business," she announced.

"To see me?" asked Hugh.

"No. Miss Lowell."

"Well, I don't care to see him."

"Hadn't you better?" suggested Hugh. "If he's got something up his sleeve we might as well know what it is."

"All right. He can come in."

Dodson bowed to Vicky, more stiffly to McClintock. The man from Virginia City just acknowledged his greeting.

"If you've come to see me about my claim, Mr. Dodson, you can speak before Mr. McClintock. He's my business adviser," Vicky said.

The big mine owner was ever so slightly taken aback. "I have an offer to make you," he said. "But first I ought to preface it with a statement of fact. Your title to the claim you've been working isn't good, I'm afraid."

"Why isn't it?" she asked sharply.

"A prior interest in it was held by

Singlefoot Bill, an old prospector who located on Bald Knob and worked all over it."

"He did not work on my claim to speak of. He's dead, anyhow. Who is there to make trouble?"

"Nobody will make you trouble, I'm sure, Miss Lowell," said Dodson with a suave smile. "My brother and I will be pleased to sign over the claim to you."

"Sign it over to me? What have you got to do with it?"

"We own it. We own practically all the Bald Knob group of mines."

Hugh spoke for the first time. "News to me, Mr. Dodson. When did you get 'em?"

"Almost two years ago. We bought out Singlefoot Bill."

"Who didn't own 'em."

"We think he did. But no need to discuss that now. The courts will pass on the title. Fortunately Nevada has courts above reproach."

"Plain robbery," Victoria said indignantly.

"I'm not here to bandy names. What I came to say is that my brother and I want to do justice, Miss Lowell. You've been spending money on the claim you thought was yours. We intend to relinquish it to you."

"I won't take it," the girl answered hotly. "I'll stand or fall with my friends. You can't buy me off."

"If you look at it that way, of course there's nothing more to be said," replied Dodson with dignity. "I'll say good evening, Miss Lowell."

"Just a moment, sir." Hugh's voice was like steel. "What's this about a warrant for my arrest?"

"Well, what about it?"

"I killed Sam Dutch in self-defense. The coroner's jury was satisfied."

"Then so am I. I'm told this warrant charges conspiracy to kidnap and kidnapping."

Dodson turned contemptuously to the door. At the same instant it opened and Byers stepped into the room. His glance traveled from Dodson to McClintock.

"They've jumped our claims," he said quietly.

"Well," said Vicky, when Dodson had gone. "What are we going to do about it?"

"We're going to get our claims back," Hugh replied.

Byers nodded. He was as decided on that point as his partner. The only question was in what way.

THEY slept on their problem and discussed it again next day. Hugh sent to Virginia City for Scot and a good lawyer. There were more conferences. Out of them came one or two decisions. Scot, Hugh, and their lawyer called at the office of the Katie Brackett and asked to see Ralph Dodson. He was out, but his brother Robert was in. At first he refused to meet them, but his visitors were so insistent that they would not take no for an answer.

Dodson had them admitted to his office. Sloan sat beside him. Another gunman was in the room. From the yellow-gray eyes of the mine owner a furtive look slid round at the McClintocks and their lawyer.

"Now, looky here, Browning," he said irritably to the lawyer, "there's no manner o' use in your pesterin' me. See Ralph. He'll talk turkey with you. I got nothin' to do with this."

"All we want is to see the paper you and Singlefoot Bill signed up. We're entitled to see it. You've jumped the Ground Hog and other claims owned by my group of clients. We'd like to look over your title."

Dodson listened sourly. But he was not a fool. He knew Browning could get a court order to look over the paper. He went to the safe and returned with a sheet of foolscap paper upon which had been written an agreement by which William Thornton, known as Singlefoot Bill, relinquished all rights in certain designated patented mining claims on Bald Knob to Robert and Ralph Dodson in consideration of three thousand dollars now paid him in hand. Browning copied the paper exactly, word for word, and comma for comma. Then the three callers left the office.

"I don't know on how solid a foundation their case rests," Browning said as they walked along Turkey Creek Avenue. "But it never does to underestimate your opponents. First, we'll check up and try to learn if the claims ever were patented. Then we've got to find out all about that contract, the circumstances under which it was signed, whether there was any record of it made at Austin. We ought to be able to discover if old Singlefoot showed any evidence of having money immediately

after it was signed. Think I'll go to Austin and make some investigations."

"Yes, let's get to the bottom of it," Scot agreed. "It looks fishy to me that they'd pay Singlefoot three thousand for claims not worth a cent then."

"Especially when he had no valid title and all they had to do was to relocate them," added Hugh. "I think you'd better go to Austin with Mr. Browning, Scot," Hugh said. "You have so many friends there you might be able to find out something important."

Scot dropped a hand on his brother's shoulder. "I'll join Browning at Austin soon as we've taken the next trick."

"Which is—?"

"To get possession of the Ground Hog and the other claims."

"You ought not to figure in that, Scot," the younger brother protested. "You're a public character."

"No, I'll go through. It's up to us to use some strategy so as to get our properties back without killing anybody. That's what our brains are for."

Hugh did not push his point. He knew when he was beaten.

"I've been millin' over an idea that might work out," he said, and as soon as Browning had left them he sketched his plan to Scot.

Colonel McClintock's eyes began to shine. "Ought to work out fine, if the valley lies as you say. Let's go right in it tonight."

"Tonight suits me," said Hugh. "But we'll have to hustle the arrangements."

They spent a busy day.

AFTER night had fallen men drifted inconspicuously to the Pony Express Corral. They were armed, all of them with revolvers, two or three with rifles. Their eyes were steady. Byers had picked them because, as he had put it, "they would stand the gaff."

"You know what we're going to do," Scot said quietly. "The Dodsons have jumped our claims and put up dummies to hold them. We plan to get the claims back by strategy. Later I'll tell you how. I suppose Dan has explained to you where you come in. We'll give leases on Bald Knob to those who go through with us. But understand one thing. I don't want a single shot fired if we can help it."

An old-timer who had come round the Horn spoke up. "Let's get this right, Colonel. Do you mean if they shoot at us we're not to give 'em what for back?"

"I mean that if there's only a wild shot or two we're not to fire back. This isn't a feud, Buck. We want possession of our property."

"All right," grinned Buck. "You're runnin' this shebang."

Byers led the way up the gulch back of the corral. Before the party had gone far a young moon came out and lit the path. They picked their trail to the head of the ravine and followed a draw which took them into the cow-backed hills. The pony express rider wound round to the rear of Bald Knob and climbed a spur upon which grew a fairly thick grove of pine nut. Here he stopped.

"Reckon we'll camp here."

The men unrolled their blankets and prepared a fireless camp. Soon most of them were sound asleep. Scot and Byers moved up the shoulder of the hill to reconnoitre. They were able to come close enough to see dimly the shaft house of the Ground Hog.

"Looks quiet enough," Scott whispered.

Byers nodded.

"Hugh won't begin to paint the sky till after midnight," the Colonel went on. "About that time we'll bring the men up here into the draw and have them ready. You're sure that little fellow Madden is all right?"

They lay in the sage for hours. Then McClintock read midnight on the face of his watch and murmured to his companion, "Time to get the men up."

Byers rose without a word and disappeared. Toward the north a faint pink began to paint the sky. The men from the camp below joined Scot. One whispered to another, "Look at the sky, Ben."

"Fire, looks like. Bet it's Piodie," the other said, startled.

"No, it's not Piodie. It's the valley back of the big hill north of town," McClintock told them.

"How do you know, Colonel?" asked the first speaker.

"Because it's a part of our fireworks," he answered. Here's the plan, boys. Madden is to run across the shoulder of the hill toward the Ground Hog. When the guard stops him he'll shout, 'Fire in Piodie; whole town burning up.' He'll explain that Dodson wants them

all to come back to fight fire. My guess is that they'll start north *muy pronto*, for most of the men guarding the mine own houses in Piodie. The news will spread down the hill, and all we'll have to do is to walk in and take possession. That is, if we're lucky. Ready, Madden?"

"Y'betcha, Colonel."

McCLINTOCK gave him careful instructions. "They're likely to ask you a lot of questions. Take your time to answer them. You'll be breathless and panting, because you've run all the way from town. If you can't think of a good answer tell them you don't know. That's the safest way. But make it clear that the fire was spreading to the residence streets when you left, and that it was Bob Dodson who told you to come for help."

"I'll say I met him just as I come out from my room fastenin' my suspenders," contributed Madden.

"Well, good luck to you." Scot gave him one more suggestion. "They may leave a man or two at the Ground Hog. If they do, try to lead them round to the north side of the shaft house. We'll try to surprise them."

The reaction of Dodson's mine guards to the news that Piodie was on fire was exactly what the McClintocks had anticipated. Madden, halted by the sentry, gasped out his message. In an incredibly short time the men were out of their bunks listening to it. Not the faintest gleam of suspicion touched the minds of one of them. Wasn't the proof of Madden's story written red in the sky? They plunged back into the bunkhouse and got into more clothes. As fast as they were ready the men went straggling downhill toward town. Much against his will they had elected a young teamster to stay on guard at the Ground Hog. Madden volunteered to stay with him on duty.

It was easy to lead the teamster round to the north side of the shaft house, from which point they could better view the angry sky and speculate on the progress of the flames.

"Doggone it, that's just my luck to be stuck up here," the guard lamented. "I wish I'd joined the hook an' ladder comp'ny when I was asked, then I'd sure enough have to go."

They sat down on a pile of timbers as Madden voiced his sympathy. A man came round the corner of the shaft house and moved toward them. The guard caught sight of him and remembered what he was there for. He jumped up and pulled out a revolver.

"Keep back there!" he ordered. "Who are you? Git back!"

The man moved evenly toward him, hands buried in his trousers pockets. His unhurried indolence radiated confidence.

"Want a little talk with you," he said quietly. "Thought probably—"

"Git back or I'll plug you."

"Oh, no. No sense in that. Bob Dodson now—"

The teamster did not know what to do. He could not shoot a man lounging toward him with his hands in his pockets. Perhaps Dodson had sent him, anyhow.

"Did Dodson—?"

The question died in his throat. He had recognized this easy-mannered intruder as the redoubtable Colonel McClintock, and he was not sufficiently alert-minded to meet the situation. If the man had come at him six-shooter in hand, he would have known quickly enough what to do. But in the fraction of time given him he hesitated; and before he could make up his mind the chance to do anything was lost. A dozen men had poured round the corner of the house.

Irritably he barked out a question, "What in Mexico you all doin' here?"

Colonel McClintock held out his hand. "Your six-gun, please."

The teamster clung to his long navy revolver. "Looky, I'm in charge here. Dodson won't like you fellows hellin' around the Ground Hog." His wandering took in the flushed sky, and found there a momentary inspiration. "Mebbe you don't know Piodie is burnin' up right now. You-all better light out for town."

The Colonel's hand was still extended. Reluctantly, against his own volition it seemed, the teamster's arm moved forward. He was still telling himself he did not intend to give up the six-shooter when Scot's fingers closed on the barrel.

McClintock divided his command. One third of the men he left with Byers in charge of the Ground Hog. The rest he took with him to the other claims that had been jumped. One of

these was deserted. At another they found the guard asleep. The jumpers on Scot's claim surrendered at discretion to superior numbers. Those who had been left at Vicky's fired a few wild snots, but as soon as they learned that the Ground Hog had been captured they gave up.

The battle of Bald Knob had been won by the attackers with no casualties.

SCOT was called back to Carson on official business, so that it was Hugh who entrained for Austin to join Browning on his search for evidence. Over a Chateaubriand with mushrooms, the two sat at a small table in the town's famous French restaurant and discussed the problem before them. The lawyer had made small headway. He knew the date of William Thornton's death. The man had fallen down a shaft while drunk two weeks after the date of the contract which the Dodsons held. He had found no evidence of any irregularity.

Browning had worked at the courthouse. Hugh mixed with people at the postoffice and in saloons. A dozen times that day he turned the conversation upon Singlefoot Bill. He picked up a good deal of information about the habits of that eccentric character, but none of it seemed very much to the point.

The first lead he struck was at the Mammoth Lager Beer Saloon. An old-timer had been telling a story about Thornton. After he had finished he pulled himself up. "Doggone it," he ruminated. "That wasn't Singlefoot, either. It was his brother, Chug."

This was news to Hugh. "Had he a brother?"

"Sure had." The old-timer chuckled. "Lived in cabins side by side an' didn't speak to each other for years."

"Where's Chug now?"

"He's been daid two years." He referred the matter to another tobacco-stained relic. "When was it Chug died, Bill?"

Bill made a stab at the date. His friend promptly and indignantly disagreed with him. They argued the matter with acrimony, but Hugh learned nothing definite from the quarrel.

He remembered that newspapers are encyclopaedias of information and departed from the saloon. Austin's editor made Hugh free of his files. He was not sure about the dates of the two old fellows' deaths. One had died about three months before the other, but he could not even tell which one had passed away first.

"They are alike as two peas from the same pod," he explained. "Even their names were almost identical. One was Willis Thornton and the other William Thornton."

Hugh's eyes quickened. He looked through the back files till he came to the issue of August 14th of two years earlier. The story he wanted was on the back page.

OBITUARY

We regret to record the death of our esteemed fellow citizen, William Thornton, due to an accident which occurred Thursday night while on his way home after an evening spent in town. It appears that Mr. Thornton must have strayed from the path in the darkness of the gulch and fallen down a deserted prospect hole. His head struck the rocks below and death was probably instantaneous. His body was discovered there next morning by Jim Simpkins who works a claim near by.

Thornton was one of the first settlers at Austin and has lived here ever since. He was an eccentric character and had become an institution of the town. His brother Willis Thornton, the well-known prospector called Singlefoot Bill, died last June.

Hugh read the last sentence a second and a third time, with growing excitement. Either the reporter was in error or Hugh had stumbled on a fact of prime importance. For if Singlefoot Bill was Willis and not William, and if he had died in June and not in August, then he could not have relinquished his claim to the Dodsons on July 29th of the same year.

The claimants must either have bought from "Chug" Thornton instead of Singlefoot, or else the paper was a forgery pure and simple. One phrase of the document stuck in Hugh's memory. With pounding heart, Hugh looked over the June files of the paper and found the obit of Willis Thornton. At least three times in the story he was referred to as Singlefoot. It even mentioned the fact that he had prospected for years at Piodie.

From the newspaper office Hugh went to the undertaker.

"Don't remember which was Willis and which William," that gentleman told him, "but I know I buried Single-

foot in June and Chug in August. Whyn't you go out to the graveyard and look up the tombstones?"

"That's good advice. I'll take it."

HUGH wandered through the bleak cemetery. He found the graves of the brothers, and above each a clapboard upon which had been lettered their names, cognomens, and the dates of their deaths. These confirmed what he had learned from the paper and from the undertaker.

"We've got 'em right. We'll spring our surprise on Dodson, trap him out of his own mouth, and throw the case out of court, before it ever goes to a jury," declared Browning excitedly when he learned what Hugh had discovered. But after full discussion, the Bald Knob owners decided to let the case go to the jury. They wanted to put the Dodsons on record in order to make stronger a criminal action against them later.

The evidence of the plaintiffs consisted of testimony to the effect that Singlefoot Bill had worked the claims, that he had a patent, and that he had sold the properties to the Dodsons. The contract of sale itself was offered in evidence. Both Robert and Ralph Dodson gave supplementary evidence as to the conditions under which the contract was made.

Their story was clear, concise, and apparently unshaken. The only fact which had apparently not been clearly established was that Thornton had ever patented the claims. The records did not show the patent, but it was urged that the papers had been destroyed in the big fire. Oral testimony was introduced to substantiate this contention.

Ralph Dodson was the last witness for the plaintiffs. In cross-examination Browning asked an apparently careless question. "You bought direct from this prospector Singlefoot Bill, Mr. Dodson? Not from any of his heirs or assigns or creditors?"

"No. The contract shows that I bought from William Thornton, known as Singlefoot Bill, the man who originally located and worked the claims."

"Let me see. The date was—?"

"July 29th, 1867."

"Quite sure that was the day on which you bought from this Singlefoot Bill?"

"Yes. The contract shows that." Dodson spoke with impatience.

"As I understand it, your title rests on the fact that you bought from William Thornton, known as Singlefoot Bill, on July 29th, 1867."

"Yes, and on the fact that we have since continued to hold the property without selling it."

"Bought from Singlefoot Bill himself, in person?"

"I've said so already twice."

"You were there when he signed the contract, Mr. Dodson?"

"Yes."

"Did he read it before signing?"

"Yes."

"You think he understood it all—knew exactly what he was doing?"

"Undoubtedly."

"That is all."

Dodson was surprised. He had expected a savage grueling, a fierce attack on every point of his testimony. Instead of which the opposing lawyer had asked a few harmless questions and waved him aside.

FIFTEEN minutes later Ralph Dodson's face had faded to an ashen gray. Browning had proved by competent witnesses, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Singlefoot Bill was named Willis Thornton and not William Thornton, and that he was buried just six weeks before the date upon which it was claimed he had signed the contract.

The lawyer was now introducing evidence to prove that Singlefoot Bill had admitted three weeks before his death, before several witnesses, that he thought he would drop work on Bald Knob without patenting any of his prospects. Ralph was not listening to it.

What a fool he had been, yet how natural had been his folly! He had made sure of the date of William Thornton's death and had obtained a specimen of his signature. This William was a prospector. He answered accurately the description of Singlefoot Bill. Who under heaven could have guessed there was another Thornton to rise up from the dead and confront him with his guilt?

But the emotion which predominated in him was hatred. He knew the Bald Knob cases were lost, and as the trial progressed he saw clearly that Hugh McClintock had been the rock upon which his plans had shipwrecked, just

as he had been the cause that had brought defeat to him when he ran for office and when he wooed Victoria Lowell. The fellow was for ever in his way. He blocked his vision so that he could find no pleasure in life. With all the bitterness of a vain man whose hopes and ambitions have been thwarted, he hated the man who had fought him to a standstill.

His hatred grew. For after the McClintocks and their friends had won the Bald Knob cases Ralph Dodson found his place in Nevada less secure. He had made many enemies, and now they rallied round the McClintocks. He and his brother were indicted for forgery and for conspiracy to defraud by committing perjury.

The Katie Brackett was pinching out. It began to look as though the firm had overextended itself financially. His bitterness centered on one man, the one he chose to think responsible for the accumulation of trouble that was heaping upon him.

His brother came to him and whispered in his ear. They were in the office of the Katie Brackett at the time.

Ralph listened sullenly. "I'll not have a thing to do with it—not a thing," he said at last. "It's too dangerous."

"I'm not askin' you to mix in it. But I'll tell you the truth. I'm scairt of that fellow. He'll send us to the pen sure as he's alive. I'll fix his clock."

"You'd better forget it."

"Hmp! Mebbe you wantta go to serve time. I don't. With that fellow outa the way we'd be all right. You don't have to know a thing. I got a way to fix it. Sure have."

"Well, don't come to me. I'll not listen to a word."

Robert Dodson grinned. He understood that he had been told to go ahead and play his own hand.

TOMMIE, a red-headed favorite of Vicky's, stayed after school to bring a supply of wood for the big drum stove in the center of the room. So wholly was his heart hers that Vicky was more touched than amused. He was a forlorn little orphan, sometimes underfed, she suspected, and she mothered him in such ways as she found possible.

"I got kindlin' an' wood 'n' everythin', teacher," he said. "What'll I do now?"

Vicky, working over the day's lessons at the desk, smiled her thanks. "That's all, Tommie. You're a great help. Run along home now."

"Must I?" he pleaded. "Can't I go home when you go?"

"No, Tommie. I've a lot of work to do yet. And you know you promised to clean up the yard for Mrs. Fenway."

Under pretense of seeing whether her pencil needed sharpening, Tommie sidled up to the desk close to his teacher. She knew what he wanted. If she had kissed him his masculine vanity would have been wounded, but the lonely child in him craved affection. Her arm slipped round his shoulder and she gave him a quick hug, scolding him a little at the same time because his coat was torn.

Tommie grinned and ran out of the building. A moment later she heard his carefree whoop outside.

It happened that the boy was at that particular stage of life when his imagination revelled in makebelieves. It was impossible for him to walk home sedately along the path. He told himself he was Kit Carson, and he hunted Indians as he dodged through the sage toward them.

The young scout's heart gave a little jump of fear. For in the clump of junipers to which his stealthy steps had brought him two men lay stretched on the ground. One of them carried a rifle.

"I got it fixed," the other was saying, almost in a murmur. "Sent him a note from that li'l tiger cat the schoolmarm for him to come an' walk home with her. He'll be along sure."

Tommie recognized the speaker as Robert Dodson, the biggest figure in the camp's life.

"You'll protect me, Dodson?" the man with the rifle asked. "You'll not go back on me?"

"Sure we'll protect you—me'n Ralph both—to a finish."

"If you don't, I'll peach on you sure."

"Sho! It's plumb safe. You do the job, then light out. No danger a-tall.'

"All right. You c'n run along. I'll git him sure as he passes along that path," the man with the rifle promised.

"Don't you make any mistake. Get him right. No need to take any chances."

"I never missed at this distance in my life. He's my meat."

"Soon as you're sure of him light out an' come down Coyote Gulch. I got an alibi all ready for you."

Tommie, face ashen, his knees buckling under him, crept back on all fours out of the junipers. As soon as he reached the open sage, he ran wildly for the schoolroom. One glance at his face told Vicky that he was very frightened.

"What is it, Tommie?" she asked, her arms about his shaking body.

He gasped out his news. She went white to the lips. It seemed to her for a moment that her heart stopped beating. It must be Hugh McClintock they were ambushing. She guessed they were luring him to his death by means of a forged note from her.

What could she do? She must move quickly and surely. There were two ways to town from the schoolhouse, one by the cut, the other over the hill. The assassin was lying close to the point where these paths met. She could not watch both and reach Hugh in time to save him.

VICKY did not know where Hugh was nor how to find him with a warning. Five minutes loss of time might be fatal. She thought of Ralph Dodson. Was he implicated in this? Even so, she knew he would cry back if he knew the plot was discovered. He was always at his office at this time of day, and that office was at this edge of town. If she could get word to him . . .

"Listen, Tommie," she cried. "You know Mr. Dodson's office—Mr. Ralph Dodson. Go to him quick as you can and tell him to come to me—right away—at the cave-in where he rescued Johnny. Tell him he must come at once—that I need him now. Understand?"

Tommie nodded. Already she was leaving the building with him.

"Go by the cut, and if you see Hugh McClintock tell him what you've told me and that he's to stay in town," she explained.

"Yes'm," Tommie said. "I'll 'member."

"Don't tell Mr. Dodson anything except that I want him just as soon as he can get to me."

"No'm, I won't."

They separated. Tommie hurried along through the cut and Vicky climbed the hill to the summit. She knew that the man lying in the junipers could see her. If she had known exactly where he was, she would have gone straight to him and forced him to give up his plan by remaining at his side. But in the thick underbrush she knew there would be small chance of finding him.

At the brow of the hill she stopped and swept the path with her eyes. Nobody was coming toward her along it from town. Her heart was in a tumult of alarm. If Hugh came by the cut and Tommie failed to meet him or to impress him sufficiently of the danger, he would walk straight into the ambush.

She was torn by conflicting impulses. One was to hurry down the hill to town with the hope of finding Hugh before he started. Another was to retrace her steps toward the junction of paths and wait for him there. Perhaps if the bushwhacker saw her there he would not dare to risk a shot. But she rejected this as a vain hope. He could fire in perfect security from the brush and slip away in the gathering dusk without any likelihood of detection.

It was not in her nature to wait in patience while Hugh might be hurrying into peril. She turned and walked swiftly back along the path she had just climbed. Dusk was falling. Objects at a distance began to appear shadowy. The panic in her grew with the passing minutes. Sobs born of sheer terror choked her as she stumbled forward.

She stopped, close to the tunnel where the little boy had been entombed. With all her senses she listened. No sound came. She waited, horrible endless minutes of agonized distress. In a small voice she cried out to the man in the chaparral that she was watching him, that if he fired she would be a witness against him. But her hoarse voice scarcely carried a dozen yards.

From out of the junipers a rifle cracked. She ran down the path blindly, in an agony of fright. Before she had taken three steps the rifle sounded again. A scream filled the dusk, a scream of fear and pain and protest.

The lurching figure of a man moved out of the gloom toward the running girl. It stumbled and went down. With a sob of woe Vicky flung herself down upon the prostrate body.

"Hugh!" she cried, and the word carried all her fears, dreads, terrors, and love.

X

BALD KNOB hummed with activities. The Ground Hog was taking out quantities of rich ore. On Vicky's claim the leasers had struck a vein which might or might not develop into a paying proposition. A dozen other shafts were going down and from the side of the hill a tunnel was progressing at a right angle toward the Ground Hog drift. The fame of the new discovery had spread over the state and from all directions prospectors were stampeding to the diggings.

The most important and the busiest man in the new camp was Hugh McClintock. He was a third owner of the Ground Hog and he had claims of his own in addition. He managed the teaming and contracting business of himself and his brother, now with temporary headquarters at Budd & Byers corral. Moreover, he was looked on as unofficial father of the camp.

On the afternoon of a sunny day a barefoot Negro boy came to him with a note. The note read:

Are you awf'ly busy, Hugh? I want to see you. Meet me at the schoolhouse at five-thirty. Be sure and come. It is very important.

Vicky Lowell

If Vicky said it was important for him to meet her, he knew she was not overstressing it. That young woman was impulsive and sometimes imperious, but it was not in her character to call a busy man from his work without a valid reason. Moreover, he was in love, with all the clean strength of his nature—and he rejoiced in his love and let it flood his life. Hence, he was on edge to be gone. However, he was detained a few moments by a business detail that had to be settled with a foreman, and after that a committee of citizens met in his office to decide about the organization of a fire department for the camp. He could not very well walk out from a meeting he himself had called. When at last he got away he knew that he was nearly fifteen minutes late for his appointment with Vicky.

Knowing that he would be rushed for time, he had ordered a saddle horse to be in waiting outside the office. He traveled fast. It was only a few minutes later when he rode down Turkey Creek Avenue at a gallop. He did not stop the horse in town, but passed through it to the suburb at the farther edge of which the school had been built.

Carelessly, without any special interest, he saw a man entering the cut two hundred yards in front of him. He glanced at his watch. He would be more than twenty minutes late for his appointment with Vicky.

Hugh rode into the cut. Halfway through it the crack of a rifle stopped him automatically. He swung from the saddle and eased the revolver in its scabbard. The sound of another shot echoed in the cut. A scream shrilled through the dusk.

Tying the horse to a sapling with a slip knot, he stepped forward. He guessed that murder had been done. The shriek that still rang in his brain had come from a man in mortal agony. Warily as a panther he moved, for he knew the murderer had a rifle, and against a rifle at a hundred yards a forty-five is as effective as a popgun.

HUGH edged round the corner of the bend beyond the cut. Instantly caution vanished. In the gathering gloom a woman was flying down the road toward him. She flung herself down to gather up in her arms a figure lying sprawled across the path. McClintock broke into a run.

"Vicky!" he cried as he reached her.

A face bloodless to the lips looked up pitifully at him. In the eyes he read amazement, incredulity. Then, quite without warning, the girl toppled over in a dead faint.

When Vicky floated back to consciousness, Hugh McClintock's arms were round her, his anxious face looking into hers.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You fainted," he explained.

"Oh!" she said vaguely. Then her eyes fell upon the still body stretched beside her. Her memory picked up lost threads again and she shuddered. "I—I thought—it was you."

"Thought it was me?" he said, and there was not such a thing as grammar in the world just then. "Why should you think that?"

"They meant to—to—kill you. One of my little boys heard them."

Hugh's arms tightened about her.

"How could they know I'd be here?" he asked gently.

"Didn't you get a note? Bob Dodson wrote it."

"A decoy, to bring me here?"

"Yes. They pretended it was from me."

She disengaged herself from his arms. Hugh tried to put the bits of the puzzle together.

His eyes fell upon the dead body at his feet.

"Then—this man—they must have shot him in place of me?"

"Yes," her dry throat gasped out.

McClintock stooped to feel the heart. It did not beat. He turned the body over. The face that stared up at him with sightless eyes was the face of Ralph Dodson.

Vicky wailed in distress. "Oh, Hugh! I did it. I killed him! I brought him here."

"How? What do you mean?"

"I sent Tommie for him—told him to come. I wanted him to save you."

Hugh looked down at the face of the man who had hated him so bitterly. "He died in my place—to save me," he said gently.

"No. I didn't tell him what I wanted him for—only that I wanted him right away. And he came—and—"

She broke down utterly. Hugh comforted her as best he could.

"You're not to blame—not in the least. The men who contrived my murder are guilty of his death. You called on him for help. That's all. He had lots of sand. Even if he had known what would happen to him he would have come to you. That's the way game men are. They go through. If he were here and could speak to you he wouldn't blame you—not a bit of it. He'd say it was just the luck of the day."

He led her to his horse.

"What—what'll we do with—him?" she asked.

"I'll arrange that when I get to town," he told her.

Hugh made a foot rest of his hand and Vicky climbed to the saddle. He walked along the path beside her.

She whispered, in a small voice she could not make quite steady, "You're so good to me."

He did not answer. What could he say, except that if it would help her he would cheerfully let red Indians torture him? And that somehow did not seem an appropriate reply.

ROBERT DODSON, appalled at the horrible thing he had done, fled with his accomplice during the night. They reached Reno, were hidden on the outskirts of the town by a friend, and crossed the Sierras furtively to California. Here the trail was lost. Nobody was very anxious to find it, for Dodson carried with him his own punishment.

Years later a man from Virginia City met in a San Francisco dive a drunken wreck who reminded him of the fugitive. He called him by name, but the man shrank from him, slid to the door, and disappeared into the night. This was the last time Dodson was ever recognized. A rumor floated to Nevada that he died of yellow fever soon after this in Mexico, but no proof of this was ever given out.

The Dodson fortune collapsed with the death of Ralph. The firm had overextended its operations and a tight money market closed it out. If Ralph had lived he might have been able to weather the storm, but without his guiding hand the Dodson properties became liabilities instead of assets. A sheriff's sale of the mines paid creditors almost in full.

The death of Ralph was the nine-days talk of the town. From the evidence of red-headed Tommie it was clear that he had directly or indirectly approved of the plan to make away with Hugh McClintock. Most Christians felt it to be a judgment of Providence that he had stepped into the trap prepared for his enemy. The pagans of the community voted it a neat piece of luck for Hugh and buried Dodson complacently and without regrets.

Hugh had been summoned by business out of town the morning after the tragedy and did not return for nearly a week. He called on Vicky the evening of the same day. The conventional parlor, with its plush album, its shell ornaments, and its enlarged photographs of Jim Budd and his wife, stifled all Hugh's natural impulses. He had never learned how to make small talk.

"Whew! It's hot here. Let's take a walk," he blurted out.

"I want to borrow a book from Mrs. Sinclair. We might walk up there," Vicky said.

They walked up the street toward the suburbs of the town. As they passed the Sacramento Storage Warehouse the girl nodded at the alley.

"Mr. Budd told me that was where the man Dutch shot at you one night," she said.

"Yes. He waited for me as I passed. Missed three shots."

She shuddered. Even now she did not like to think of the dangers through which he had come to her in safety.

"All past," he said cheerfully. "Strange, when you come to think of it. All our enemies, Scot's and mine, dead or driven out. Yet from first to last all we ever did was to defend ourselves."

They came to the end of the street, as he had done on that other night to which she had referred. They looked up into the stars and the clean wonder of the night took hold of them.

"There's never been any woman but you in my life," Hugh broke the silence at last. "Even when you were a li'l trick and I bought that first doll for you—even then I was gettin' ready to love you and didn't know it."

"I've got that doll yet. It's the dearest doll," she said softly.

He smiled. "And the black doll—have you that?"

"I have that, too. I just loved the boy that sent it to me."

"Do you love the man he's grown into, Vicky?"

"Yes."

He drew a deep long breath of joy. His dreams had come true.

Next Issue's Three Great Western Novels!

THE FEATHERED SOMBRERO — **Norman A. Fox**

When Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis hired out to the wearer of the feathered sombrero, they didn't know exactly what their job would be—but when they found themselves dodging bullets, they decided to learn some of the answers!

OKLAHOMA — **Courtney Ryley Cooper**

While the nation throbbed with the cry for new land to settle, three brave pioneers—Mort Sturdevant, Pawnee Bill and John Mason—pooled their guns and wits in a gallant fight to bring peace and justice to a wild Frontier!

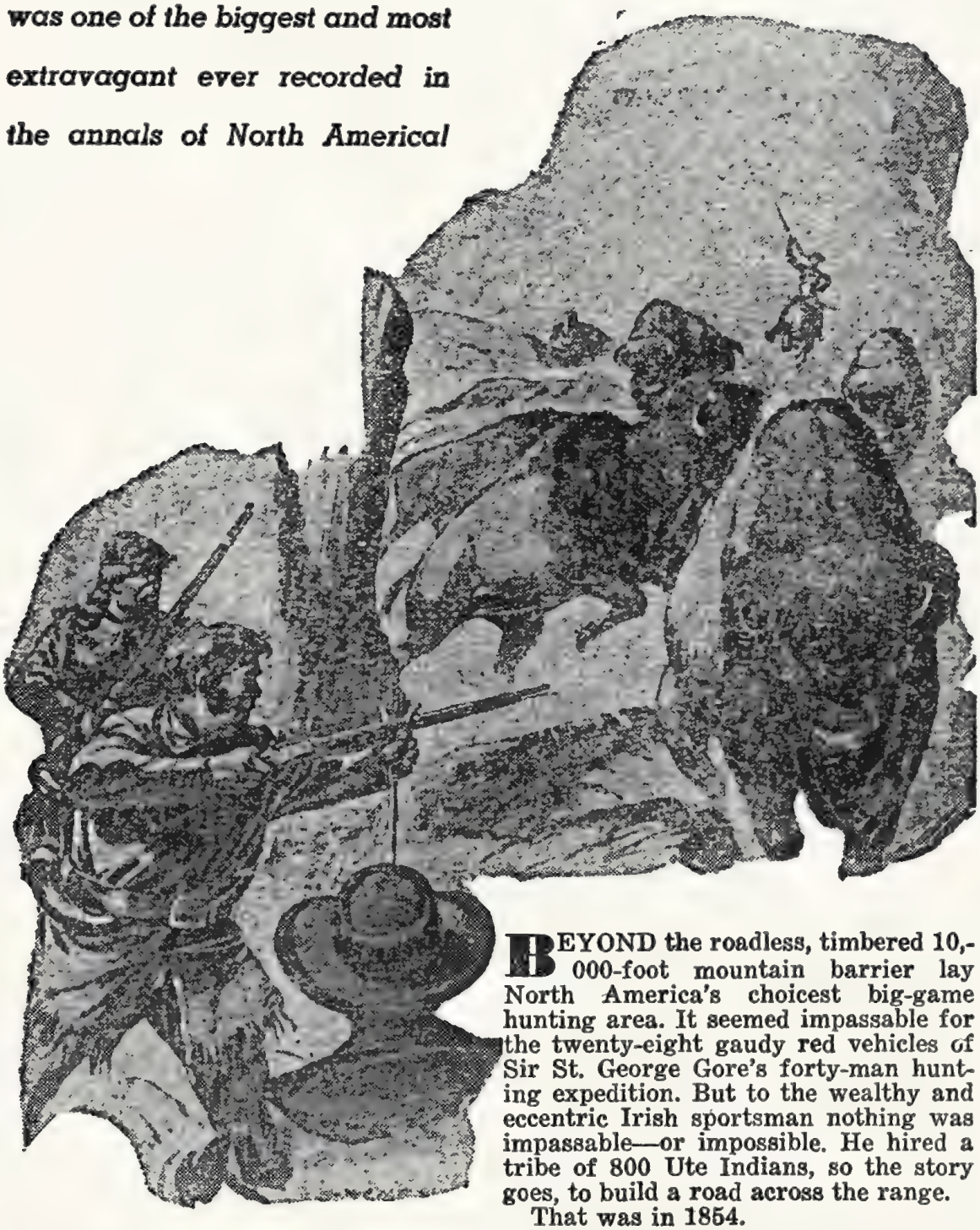
ROARING RIVER RANGE — **Arthur Henry Gooden**

The mysterious disappearance of his father's friend, Tom Sherwood, causes ranch owner Allan Rand to take the trail to Roaring River—where he finds himself in a thunderous six-gun battle when outlaw killers cross his tracks!

PLUS OTHER EXCITING STORIES AND FEATURES

The surprising true story of an early hunting expedition which was one of the biggest and most extravagant ever recorded in the annals of North Americal

HAPPY



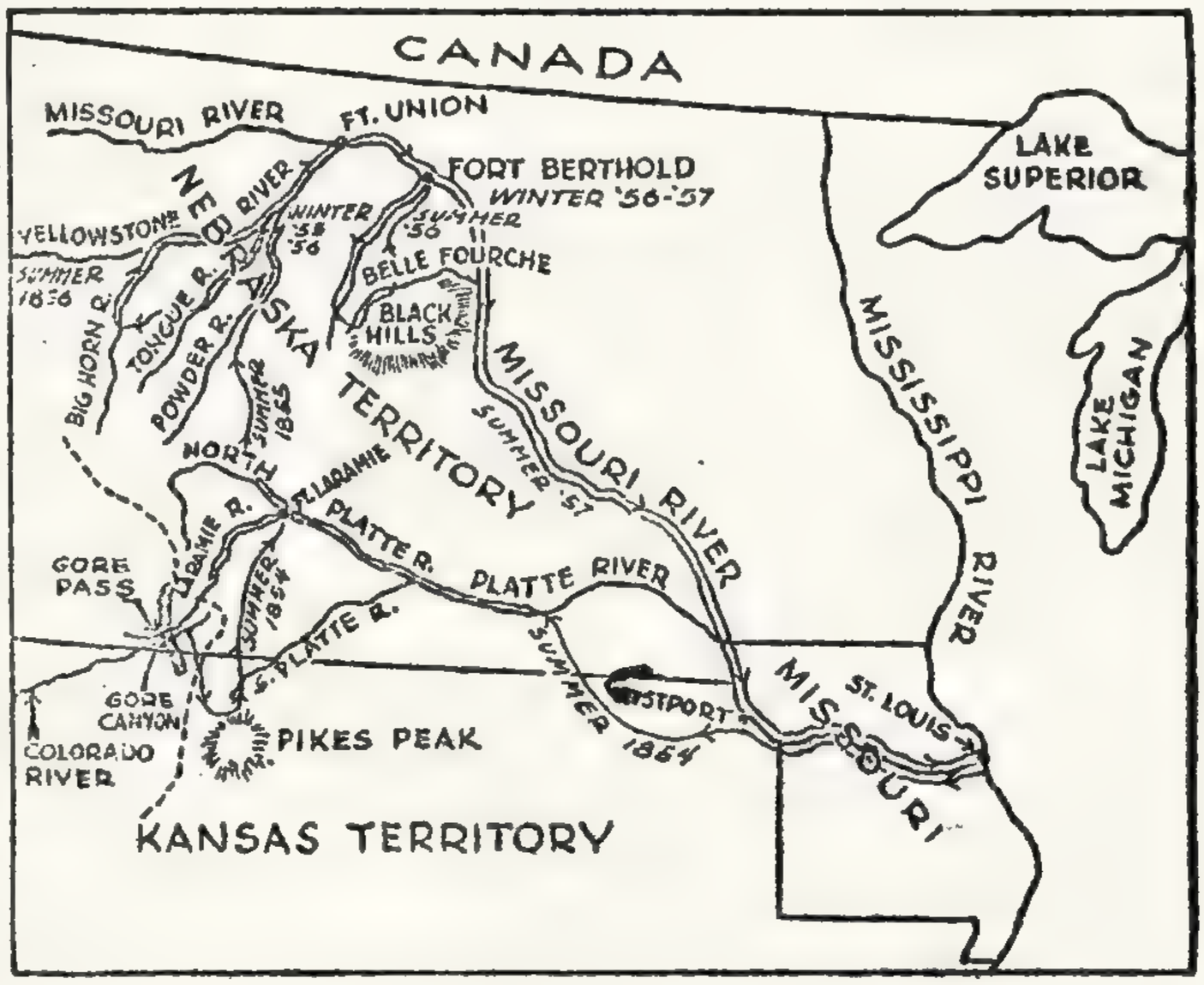
As the herd thundered past, Gore, supporting his rifle with a forked stick, would blaze away and then snatch another weapon from the hands of a gun bearer

BEYOND the roadless, timbered 10,000-foot mountain barrier lay North America's choicest big-game hunting area. It seemed impassable for the twenty-eight gaudy red vehicles of Sir St. George Gore's forty-man hunting expedition. But to the wealthy and eccentric Irish sportsman nothing was impassable—or impossible. He hired a tribe of 800 Ute Indians, so the story goes, to build a road across the range.

That was in 1854.

Today a broad automobile highway crosses the Gore range in western Colorado at Gore pass, following the approx-

HUNTING GROUNDS



This is the route of the Gore Expedition, 1854-57. Leaving St. Louis in May, 1854, party reached Ft. Laramie one month later. Same summer, south to headquarters of Colorado river and over present Gore pass. Route as shown from Gore pass to Pike's Peak only approximate (records inaccurate). Spent winter of 1854-55 at Ft. Laramie. Summer of '55, north along Powder river to Yellowstone river, to winter camp of '55-'56 on Tongue river. Summer of '56, west to Big Horn river, east along Yellowstone to Missouri river, up Little Missouri to Black Hills. Winter of '56-'57 at Ft. Berthold, party was disbanded. Summer of '57, Gore returned to St. Louis via steamboat.

by FORBES PARKHILL

imate route blazed by the Indian road builders. Diesel-drawn streamlined trains of the Denver & Rio Grande Western railroad roar through the red depths of stupendous Gore canyon.

These three place names remain to commemorate the costliest, longest, most astonishing hunting expedition ever staged in North America. In all likelihood the world has never known a hunt rivaling the fabulous Gore expedition, conducted solely for the pleasure of one man.

Other hunting parties, before and since, were made up of groups of wealthy sportsmen and their retainers, and occasionally were accompanied by military escorts. Sometimes they shared expenses, sometimes a wealthy host paid the bill. But it is certain that no other North American hunting party ever required so many hired retainers to provide sport for one man for three years.

Sir St. George Gore's de luxe hunt cost approximately $500,000, and covered at least 6,000 miles of trackless mountain and prairie. According to government report, he bagged 2,500 buffalo, 1,600 elk and deer, 125 bear and more antelope than anyone troubled to count.

Gaudy Luxurious Adventuring

Hollywood never dreamed up anything with the Arabian Nights atmosphere of Gore's luxurious adventuring in our wide open spaces. It ended in a climactic $50,000 blaze of glory, when he destroyed his wagons and equipment

in a spite bonfire rather than pay profiteering prices charged by his American suppliers.

Gore employed no press agent, unfortunately. Histories contain but fragmentary records of his remarkable hunt. But he is known to have shot his way through thousands of miles of big game territory now embraced within the borders of Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas. He even offered the government to recruit and equip, at his own expense, an army to exterminate the Sioux tribe!

Gore bore a remarkable resemblance to the cartoons of John Bull. A bachelor in his mid-forties, he was plump, blond, ruddy and nearly bald, with short, straw-colored Dundreary whiskers. He is described as "mercurial, wrathful, effervescent and reckless," a man with a "kind heart," who drank sparingly.

Apparently unsociable, he was an animated conversationalist on subjects that interested him, and "when addressed courteously, always gave a courteous reply." His men respected rather than loved him. They never complained of injustice, for he generously rewarded extra duty. For nearly three years his hunting expedition cost nearly his entire income of $200,000 annually from rents in Counties Sligo and Donegal.

No one knows who or what inspired him to undertake his sumptuous expedition to western America. His young friend, Sir William-Thomas-Spencer Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, K. G., D. C. L., is known to have visited the Oregon country in 1853 during a leisurely 'round-the-world trip. Perhaps he suggested the hunt, for he was Gore's guest for a few weeks at the beginning of the expedition.

Account books of the American Fur Company reveal the first actual records of the Gore expedition. They show he made huge purchases while outfitting at St. Louis in May of 1854. He paid for his equipment with drafts on Baring Brothers, his London bankers.

He bought twenty-one crimson two-horse *charettes*, or Red River French carts of the type then used by French-Canadian *voyageurs* and American trappers; four six-mule wagons; two three-yoke ox wagons and, for his personal use, a carriage.

His purchases included 112 horses, eighteen oxen, three milk cows, and thirty-six greyhounds to augment the pack of fourteen staghounds he had brought from Ireland. He recruited forty-one employees, frontiersmen and *voyageurs*, mostly former trappers for the American Fur Company.

When he left St. Louis his guide was Henry Chatillon, presently to be succeeded by his brother, Joe. Noted *voyageurs* in the party were Louis Dapron and Jeremiah Proteau. They wore dark blue coats, with hoods; leggings fringed with scarlet and black beaded cloth; moccasins embroidered with stained porcupine quills; crimson sashes; cross belts for beaded shot pouches and their fringed and tasseled powder horns. They rode Rob Roy hunting ponies with beaded buckskin pads for saddles. And how they could fiddle and sing and dance "French Fours!"

Few Noted Departure

The party was soon joined by Wagon-boss Henry Bostwick, lean frontiersman in fringed buckskin, moccasins and fur cap. He always rode with a long rifle in the crook of his elbow.

A search of existing files fails to show that St. Louis newspapers took note of the departure of the expedition. Only known contemporary newspaper description is contained in a dispatch in the *Ohio State Journal* from a correspondent writing of the departure of westbound immigrant trains from Westport, Kansas.

Staring in open-mouthed wonder as the strange caravan passed through Fort Leavenworth was a small boy, who forty years later mentioned the incident briefly in a magazine article. The boy was to become the last of the great scouts: Col. William F. ("Buffalo Bill") Cody.

Gore and his temporary guest, who was known to the retinue as "Lord Fitzwilliam," rode in state in the carriage at the head of the long string of wagons. Fitzwilliam, an amateur astronomer, carried with him a telescope with a six-inch lens. He went along just for the ride. After a few weeks he returned to St. Louis to resume his 'round-the-world journey.

Gore slept in a brass bed in a 10 x 18-foot striped linen tent, and carried with him an iron wash-stand and table. His brass bed was transported in a strange

wagon, built with cranks at all four corners. When rain threatened, four henchmen would spring to the cranks, whereupon, according to an historical account, a canvas top "lifted into view out of the bed," converting the vehicle into a covered-wagon bedroom.

Two wagons in charge of a specialist were filled with Gore's personal fishing tackle. The specialist's duties were to tie trout flies. Another wagon contained only the wealthy sportsman's personal weapons—seventy-five muzzle-loading rifles of such famous makes as Joe Manton, Purdy, Hawken and Westley Richards; one Sharps rifle of the then new breech-loading type; fifteen shotguns, and so many pistols that no one ever recorded the number.

His style of shooting demanded an arsenal. He never hunted alone. Usually he was accompanied by as many as seven heavily-laden gun bearers. In hunting buffalo, he hid himself and his gun caddies in a blind and waited for his master of hounds to flush the quarry.

As the herd thundered past, Gore, supporting his rifle with a forked stick, would blaze away and then snatch another weapon from the hands of a gun bearer, banging away until the supply of guns or animals was exhausted. He never loaded his own gun.

When firing from a rest his marksmanship was excellent, but his frontiersmen reported him to be an indifferent shot when it came to off-hand snapshooting. His favorite mount was a tall, gray Kentucky thoroughbred named Steel Trap, but by frontier standards Gore was an unskilled horseman. He preferred his carriage to the saddle, but not because of laziness. He could outwalk any member of his party.

Jim Bridger Fascinated Gore

With the exception of the scout, Jim Bridger, no American ever succeeded in penetrating his shell of reserve. He just wasn't the kind to encourage a palsy-walsy attitude on the part of the hired help, although his liberality made it a pleasure to work for him.

After paying Joe Merrival $150 for a horse, Gore rode the animal all afternoon and then paid the horse-trader an additional $100, insisting that Joe had cheated himself. It was an error that was to culminate in the spite burning of his own equipment, for from that time on the natives pegged him as a pushover for high prices and overcharged him outrageously.

By the end of June, 1854, the party had reached the junction of the Platte and the Laramie rivers, where stood old Fort Laramie—not to be confused with the Laramie, Wyoming, of today. The best of meager records indicates that Gore, then under the guidance of Joe Chatillon, struck out to the southwest into Kansas Territory, hunting in the wide mountain valleys of what today is northern Colorado. Such a valley was known to the French-Canadian trappers as a *parc*, or hunting preserve. They are still called "parks."

From North Park the expedition crossed the continental divide into Middle Park, only to find its progress blocked by the mountain range which now bears the name of the Irish sportsman who hired a tribe of Indians to build a road across it.

Forty years later Henry Chatillon, son of Gore's guide, in a letter now in the files of the Colorado State Historical Society, wrote that his father told him the party recrossed the continental divide and "camped on all four sides of Pike's Peak" before returning to Fort Laramie for the winter.

If this is true, and Gore built his own roads for his wagon train through some of the most rugged mountain terrain in the United States, he performed a feat unequalled in the history of Western exploration. Had he been seeking gold instead of sport he might have fathered the Pike's Peak gold rush, for within five years the virgin wilderness he traversed was swarming with gold-seekers.

Meanwhile Jim Bridger, expelled by the Mormons from his trading post at Fort Bridger, in what today is southwestern Wyoming, had started back to Westport to visit his wife. Encountering Gore wintering at Fort Laramie, Jim was promptly hired as head guide and story-teller.

Between the illiterate, rawhide-tough scout and his cultured but eccentric employer there speedily developed a friendship that was the more remarkable because they had little or nothing in common.

For example, sleeping habits. Sir St. George was accustomed to read until late at night, and then remain in his

brass bed until 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning, when he arose, bathed, downed a toddy and girded himself for the day's hunt. But Jim, child of nature, slept, with a fine disregard for timing, whenever he became sleepy. He ate, not by the clock, but strictly from hunger. Historians note that he ate no bread for seventeen years.

Scout "Sings Injun"

As often as not, the desire to sleep would seize Jim in mid-afternoon. Waking, refreshed, shortly after midnight, he'd entertain himself until daylight squatting by the fire eating venison and "singing Injun," providing with tin pan and spoon a tom-tom accompaniment.

Scorning to use Sir St. George's title, democratic Jim always addressed him as plain "Mr. Gore." The journal of Capt. R. B. Marcy, who talked with Gore at the conclusion of the expedition, relates that the titled Irishman frequently invited the scout to dine in his striped linen tent and, after a few glasses of wine, spent the evening reading aloud to him and listening to his comments.

Concerning Shakespeare's Falstaff, Jim "rather calculated that thar big Dutchman, Mr. Full-stuff, was a little too fond of lager beer."

Because Jim was recognized as America's champion teller of tall tales, Gore liked to read to him from the adventures of Baron Munchausen. Jim was skeptical, insisting cagily, "I didn't swaller everything he said. I reckon he was a durned liar."

Although Jim Bridger was making history, history, as such, left him cold. When Gore read him an account of the battle of Waterloo, he politely conceded "it was considerable of a scrimmage," but added, "The Britishers must have fought better than they did at New Orleans, when Old Hickory gave 'em forked chain lightning."

The following summer the party followed the Big Horn river north to the Yellowstone, through the heart of the buffalo country. Quarters for the ensuing winter were established on the Tongue River, a few miles above the site of the present city of Miles City, Montana.

There a log fort was built, including stables, storehouses and barracks, all surrounded by a stockade. But Henry Bostwick knocked out his pipe in the wrong place, causing a prairie fire that destroyed much of the forage. Through the winter of 1855-56 the horses existed largely on the bark of cottonwood trees. Each man was required to gather 125 pounds of this forage daily.

Meanwhile Gore had a cabin built at the mouth of the Tongue for himself and his horse, Steel Trap. While the other horses fed on cottonwood bark, Steel Trap ate corn meal from the hands of Sir St. George, himself.

About the only appurtenance of civilization the party failed to carry with it was a coffin which was needed during the winter when a wagoner named Uno died. Gore was shocked at the assumption that Uno would rest just as well if buried in "nothing but his clothes."

He ordered a coffin made from a precious wagon bed. It was lined with wool cloth from his dwindling stores. Over the grave he built a mausoleum of logs and wrote to the wagoner's kinfolk, offering to bring back the body for burial in "the States." The kinfolk reckoned Uno would rest right comfortable where he was.

Gore was generous in his dealings with the Indians, showering them with gifts of beads and tobacco. When a white profiteer demanded black market prices for six beefs, Gore flew into a rage, bought an entire herd of fifty from another cattleman, and gave the forty-four unneeded animals to the redskins.

Indians Steal Horses

Consequently he regarded it as an act of base ingratitude when the Indians raided his Tongue River camp and stole twenty-one horses. His men pursued the thieves sixty miles until a snowstorm blotted out the trail. But he cooked up a hot reception for them when they made a second raid.

In the ensuing melee, according to the Lieut. James H. Bradley manuscript in the files of the Historical Society of Montana, Gore's cook wounded one of the marauders, Big Plume, who turned out to be the Indian brother-in-law of "Major" Alexander Culbertson, the American Fur Company trader at Fort Union. Gore's troubles really began to pile up on him, for Culbertson was one of the most influential white men west of the Mississippi.

Presently the trader visited Gore's camp, accompanied by Colonel A. J. Vaughan, Indian agent at Fort Union. They demanded to know by what authority Gore, a British citizen, had built a fort on United States soil. The sportsman flashed the passport issued to him by the Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, lost his temper, and told off his visitors. Vaughan filed a complaint with his superiors, charging that Gore was causing unrest among the Indians by killing so much game. Culbertson bided his time.

In the spring the party ascended the Tongue River and crossed to the Rosebud, where fresh horses were bought from the Crow Indians. While some of his men floated his trophies down the Yellowstone in flatboats, Gore traveled overland and joined them at Fort Union, where the Yellowstone joins the Missouri.

It was costing him a huge amount to maintain his small army of retainers, but oddly enough, in a wilderness where he was spending three years without visiting a town, his banking problems were the least of his troubles. Any trading post of the Ameriacn Fur Company would honor his drafts on Baring Brothers.

From Fort Union the party turned south, ascending the Little Missouri to the Black Hills. No sooner had they reached the marvelous trout waters of the Belle Fourche than a catastrophe befell them.

They discovered gold!

Describing the incident, historian Robert E. Strahorn in 1877 quoted *Voyageur* Jerry Proteau as follows:

"One Sunday I went out to the falls of Swift or Rapid creek with Lamourie. As we were standing by the falls I noticed some yellow-looking stuff in the water, and I said to Lamourie, 'By George, there's gold!'

"I took off my shirt and scooped up three double handfuls of the yellow stuff and put it in my shirt. Then we went back to camp. Sir George noticed me and asked me what I had in my shirt. I said, 'Gold!' He looked at it a little while, then he said, "Oh, no, Jerry, that's not gold. That's mica.'

"I was not very well posted about gold and thought Sir George was. He took it and put it in two black bottles and placed them in his chest. The next day we marched out of the Black Hills and two or three days after, Bridger told me that Sir George told him it *was* gold. Sir George also told Lamourie that if he would prospect on the head of Swift creek he would find rich gold there."

Gore Fears Gold "Rush"

For fear his men would desert him to pan the sandbars, Gore departed from the Black Hills precipitately. He might have made millions from the discovery, but he was interested in sport, not additional riches. Twenty years were to elapse before gold was re-discovered in the Black Hills.

As he headed back down the Little Missouri, another Indian raid left him almost horseless. It was then, according to Buffalo Bill's account, that he offered to raise a private army to exterminate the Sioux. At the time it seemed a good idea to everyone except Uncle Sam.

Returning to Fort Union in the autumn, Gore lost Jim Bridger to the army, which requisitioned him to serve as a guide for the expedition against the Mormons. Sir St. George decided to call it a day.

He offered to sell all his wagons and other equipment to the American Fur Company, and asked the none-too-friendly Culbertson to build him two sixty-foot mackinaw boats in which to float his trophies the 2,200 miles down the Missouri to St. Louis.

Maybe the trader thought he had the Irishman over a barrel. At any rate, his price for building the boats was so high, and his offer for the equipment so low, that he succeeded in killing the goose that laid the golden eggs.

To spite Culbertson, Gore heaped all his wagons, harness and other equipment on the bluff across the Missouri from the trading post, touched a match to them, and enjoyed a $50,000 bonfire. To make certain the trader could recover nothing of value, he even combed the ashes the next day for wagon tires and other metal, which he dumped into the deepest channel of the river.

Giving away his dogs and his few remaining horses, he disbanded his party. He presented Bostwick with a thousand dollars' worth of expensive firearms, and when the wagon boss insisted on paying,

charged him only twelve dollars. An odd item in the South Dakota Historical collections notes that many years later Fort Kearney was overrun with dogs descended from Gore's Irish staghounds.

Gore Lives In Hogan

The disgruntled sportsman spent the winter of 1856-57 at Fort Berthold, living in an earthen hut as the lavishly paying guest of the Minatari tribal chief, Crow's Breast. When the ice broke up in the spring he boarded the first steamboat for St. Louis and returned to Ireland, where he died in 1878.

Sir William Drummond Stewart of Murthley, Scotland, made six summer trips between 1834 and 1843 from New Orleans to the Green River fur traders' rendezvous in the Rockies.

Sir John Watts Garland, who had hunted big game in India and Africa, staged a notable buffalo hunt in 1869.

In the same year Lord Adair, later Earl of Dunraven, spent four weeks hunting buffalo with the aid of a military escort. Later he bought, as a private hunting preserve, the land now approximately included within the boundaries of Rocky Mountain National Park.

In 1871 James Gordon Bennett and a party of New York millionaires were guests of General Phil Sheridan on a buffalo hunt centering at Fort McPherson.

During the winter of 1873 the Grand Duke Alexis, with a military escort, hunted buffalo near North Platte.

But for costliness, elapsed time, territory covered and amount of game killed, none of these hunts could hold a candle to the fabulous expedition of the eccentric eighth baronet of Manor Gore.

White Man's Friend

The Story of Chief Washakie

By COLE WEYMOUTH

THE disaster which befell Custer at the Little Bighorn might just as well have happened to General Crook, were it not for the great Shoshone chief, Washakie.

A mighty alliance of tribes, including the Sioux, Arapaho and Cheyennes, had flung every last fighter into an all-out war against the whites. This array of warriors under Crazy Horse, called the "finest light cavalry in the world," hit Crook before Custer. In fact it was only eight days before the Custer massacre and a scant eight miles from the scene of Custer's Last Stand that Crook made contact with the Indians.

Fortunately for Crook, he had some Crow scouts with him, and as a fighting force, Washakie and 213 of his Shoshone warriors, ablaze with color of headdress, feathers, beads, bells, brass buttons and strips of scarlet cloth. Their lances were tipped with dyed feathers and adorned with painted crests. Washakie's headdress swept the ground beyond his pony's tail.

When Crazy Horse attacked, he used much the same maneuver that he worked on Custer, employing his superior numbers to fashion two wings of attackers which would clamp a nutcracker grip on the defending whites. But Washakie, anticipating the move, flung his warriors into the hinge of the nutcracker and helped smash the attack.

The soldiers held, but had to withdraw to avoid defeat. Crook showed more appreciation for Washakie's help than most white men and presently there arrived from President Grant, a gift for Washakie in recognition of his services. It was a silver mounted saddle, hand-tooled in bright colors. The presentation was made by an Indian agent, who handed it over and waited for some remark of appreciation from Washakie. The chief was silent.

"Don't you want to say something to General Grant?" asked the agent.

"No."

"No! Do you want him to think you ungrateful?"

Washakie looked at him out of inscrutable eyes. "When a favor is shown a Frenchman," he said, "he feels it in his head and his tongue speaks. When a kindness is shown an Indian, he feels it in his heart, and the heart has no tongue."

Why Washakie picked the French as example is puzzling, since the comparison is unfair to them, but the remark as quoted is historically correct and has remained as part of Wyoming's history.

THE TRAIL BOSS

(Continued from page 9)

following suit on fence and better breeds. Or wishing they had. . . .

Personally I don't know, and never did know Poker Face's friends, Mike McCabe, the old time Texan, and Bill Bell, the ex-lawyer from the East. But they simply did what others did who brought brains and vision to the cattle country along with a willingness to undertake hardships that pioneer life in any new land necessarily entails.

There are countless documented instances of this in the actual history of the gradual development of the Western range into the world's greatest meat and stock producing areas of all times.

For instance John W. Iliff, the famous Cattle King of Colorado, early imported blooded Shorthorn bulls to run with his range stock. Iliff's herds numbererd close to 40,000 at their peak and in the late 1860's the lead he took strongly influenced the cattle herds of both western Nebraska and Wyoming.

Herefords and Shorthorns

In the early 1870's Conrad Kohrs, head of the Pioneer Cattle Company of Montana, made a similar move, And when Herefords were introduced to the Western cow country he crossed many of them with Shorthorn bulls to produce the first Shorthorn-Hereford cross breeds. Kohrs was no piker in the ranch business either. In 1879 he is reported to have branded nearly 50,000 head of cattle on his Sun River ranch in Montana.

It was the same general story with the men who pioneered Herefords, now perhaps the prime Western beef cattle, on the vast grasslands of the West.

The Hereford story has been told time and again. But the old native stock is not perhaps so well or so generally known. Yet the Shorthorn influence on Western range stock dates back to the earliest days of the industry.

As a matter of fact the Shorthorns even antedate it. Though the first trail herds have always been thought of as Longhorns —and they were as far as the West is concerned—driven up from Texas over the

[*Turn page*]

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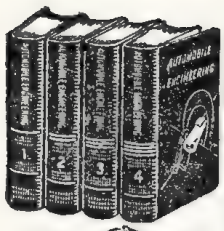

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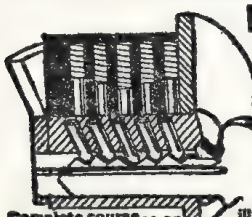

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old Chisholm and other equally famous trails, actually the first recorded long trail drive to market was an Eastern operation. And a Shorthorn drive at that.

Way back in 1805 Felix and George Renick, names few Westerners know, drove a large trail of Shorthorns from the Scioto valley in Ohio over the Alleghany mountains and down into Baltimore. It was a success. Moreover this first long trail drive of market steers is really what established the later pattern of the Western trail drives. In its day it set the pace for the growing commercial beef market, and beef producing business in a then young and new but already burgeoning United States.

As a matter of fact the Renick family, who really pioneered the business, remained one of the dominant factors in the industry for very close to 100 years. That in itself is a pretty good record. It shows what hard thinking plus hard pioneer living has been able to do in this country for a man who uses his gray matter as well as his muscles in striving to get ahead.

West or East, time and again in the cattle business or along other lines the "country" boys have shown themselves to be more than average smart by any standards you care to name—"city" brains or any other.

And of course success in any line of endeavor takes a goodly amount of enterprise as well. It reminds me of an old saying out in the Western cow country. "The fellow that won't ride anything but a tame

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bronc, better hang his saddle on a corral post. He ain't going anywheres nohow."

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—THE TRAIL BOSS

OUR NEXT ISSUE

OUR next three-ring fiction round-up in TRIPLE WESTERN offers the following group of top-flight novels by ace Western writers:

THE FEATHERED SOMBRERO
By Norman A. Fox

OKLAHOMA
By Courtney Ryley Cooper

ROARING RIVER RANGE
By Arthur Henry Gooden

We're positive that our readers will admit this line-up of novels is fully in keeping with our high fiction standards. Each of these books is filled with six-gun thrills and action. Each book has been expertly abridged to make for more pleasant and enjoyable reading. And each book is by a high-ranking author. The best is none too good for TRIPLE WESTERN fans!

"The Feathered Sombrero," by Norman A. Fox, which is the lead-off novel in our next issue, is a rousing, hard-riding saga involving Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis, two of the most popular characters in all Western fiction. In this, their first appearance in TRIPLE WESTERN, the two saddle pards make a deal to work for a man who wore a feathered sombrero only to find out that the hat and anything connected with it meant danger and flying bullets.

The two range riders' adventures began when they came upon an announcement which read:

Rowdy Dow. If you are interested in a well-paying assignment, write Captain Buck Trimble, care of Rancho Del Diablo, Bearclaw, and tell me you are coming. I will find you in Bearclaw and you will recognize me by a feathered sombrero I shall be wearing.

That was all the inducement Rowdy Dow and Stumpy Grampis needed. Though they were miles away from Bearclaw at the time they immediately set out to find Captain Trimble. A rainstorm overtook them in the evening while they were still a half

[*Turn page*]

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hour's ride from Halfway House, a frontier crossroads hotel.

Plodding dully through the rain with Stumpy Grampis complaining about his need for a drink, Rowdy Dow's horse suddenly shied at something in the road. Rowdy dismounted, lit a match and discovered a young Mexican, dressed as if for a fiesta, lying close to the brush. He was unconscious and his black hair was matted with blood.

They picked him up and hurried on to Halfway House. The hotel looked deserted. But when they pounded on the door the proprietor came to the door with a lantern and led them to an upstairs room. Rowdy washed the Mexican's wound, then asked for a doctor. The proprietor informed him that the nearest medical man lived in Bearclaw.

The Mexican recovered consciousness only long enough to thank his rescuers and to reveal that his name was Don Sebastian Ibarra. Leaving money to pay for the room, Rowdy and Stumpy decided to head for Bearclaw.

Outside in the rain-splashed darkness Rowdy happened to glance up at the second-floor windows. In the room next to Ibarra's, where a lamp burned, he saw a girl. A vivid flare of lightning revealed her face pressed against the window pane. She looked terrified and as he watched she beckoned frantically to him.

Telling Stumpy to wait, Rowdy rushed back to the door. It was locked. Quickly he smashed a window and crawled through. The barroom was in total darkness. There was no sound anywhere in the house. He groped his way to the stairs, mounted to the second floor.

Light showed under the doorway of Ibarras' room. Gun in hand, Rowdy made for the door beyond. Abruptly there was a scuffling movement in the shadows ahead of him. Someone careened against him. A gun boomed. A bullet fanned past his ear.

He threshed about in the dark hall with his assailant until a gun barrel clouted him along the side of the head and left him

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stunned. At once there was a wild clatter going down the stairs. Somewhere in the hotel a gun crashed again. Then Stumpy came pounding up the stairs, panting for breath and yelling that somebody had dashed out through a rear door. And he also stated that the proprietor had been shot and killed.

Rising to his feet, Rowdy glanced at a button in his hand, torn from the coat of his attacker. Then he remembered the girl and dashed into the room. He found a lamp, lit it and saw that the girl was gone. But in the dust on the window sill was a message: FELICIA—DIABLO—HELP.

Immediately the thought of Trimble's spread, Rancho Del Diablo, leaped to Rowdy's mind and he decided it was time they got moving for Bearclaw. But before leaving they stopped off in Ibarra's room. There another shock awaited them. The wounded Mexican had vanished into thin air!

This was only the beginning of a range mystery that grew deeper hour by hour as

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Rowdy and Stumpy found themselves immersed in a conspiracy in which all pay-offs were made in hot lead. They arrived in Bearclaw safely, were approached by Captain Trimble, wearing a bizarre feathered sombrero and eager to send them on an even more bizarre mission to Mexico.

Rowdy turned the proposition down coldly and Trimble left. And it was only after Trimble had gone that Rowdy told Stumpy that he meant to get inside Rancho Del Diablo even though he knew it was heavily guarded. He gave Stumpy two reasons. The first was Felicia, the frightened girl in Halfway House, who he was certain was in dire peril. And the second reason was that Captain Trimble, when he appeared, was wearing a coat with buttons that matched the button Rowdy had got in his fight with his unknown assailant in Halfway House!

For fast action, baffling mystery and hard-riding climax that can't be beat we recommend "The Feathered Sombrero" by Norman A. Fox. It's tops in entertainment, so watch for it.

The Opening of Oklahoma

"Oklahoma," by Courtney Ryley Cooper, one of the greatest writers who ever lived, is a swashbuckling tale of courageous pioneers—men with vision who combined their wits and their strength to lead the fight for the opening of Oklahoma to settlement.

This is a book definitely off the beaten track. It is told with sincerity and with a great depth of feeling. Here in one compelling page after another you will find the adventures of three brave, far-seeing men—Mort Sturdevant, Major Gordon W. Lillie otherwise known as Pawnee Bill, and Honest John Mason.

Sturdevant was a young man of wealthy family. On his father's side the men had been shrewd business men. On his mother's side the men had been adventurers. And Sturdevant, wanting no part of his father's fortune, was actually happy when he learned that his father's will turned all of his money over to some secret use.

Looking for a job, Sturdevant journeyed out to the show grounds at Baltimore to hit up his friend Pawnee Bill for work. He found Pawnee Bill all right. But the showman had just sold everything to pay the salaries of his people. Pawnee Bill was broke.

At that moment in the pouring rain the two friends made a compact to link their energies in a daring new venture. The time was 1888 and the nation was astir with the cry for new land for settlers. People were clamoring for the government to open up a strip of land, two million acres in area, in Indian Territory for settlement. It was this section of ground on the edge of what was know as the Cherokee Strip that became a focal point of a grim behind-the-scenes political struggle.

Certain business interests had asked Pawnee Bill to lead a picked group of pioneers into Oklahoma in defiance of Army patrols and force the issue to a head. Sturdevant decided to join Pawnee Bill.

Accordingly, they took the train to Wichita, Kansas, which was to be the jumping off point.

In Wichita they found the people overwhelmed by land rush fever. Many of them looked poor and bedraggled. Their only hope for the future was to secure new land on which to settle and grow crops. But there were men there who were ready to invade Oklahoma at gun-point and to blazes with the consequences.

Sturdevant and Pawnee Bill did not want to be responsible for an ugly wave of bloodshed. At last, they figured out a way of forcing the opening of the territory. And when the rush came they were at the head of the pack, putting their roots into the new territory and leading the way out of the general chaos and confusion that threatened to engulf one and all.

With them went a great newspaper man, Honest John Mason, to give the new land the news as soon as it happened and to give it straight from the shoulder in defiance of the lawless elements. Chief among these was the dreaded Mowbray gang. And it was in defense of lovely Mary Bryan—a

[*Turn page*]

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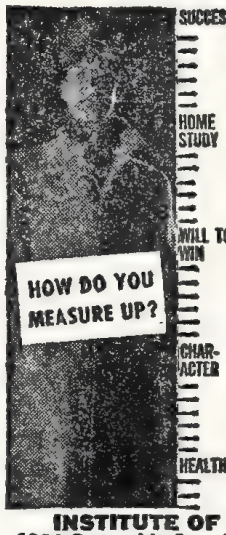

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girl who was to influence his life greatly in the violent months to come—that Sturdevant first encountered the Mowbrays.

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A Dangerous Quest

The third featured novel scheduled for the next issue of TRIPLE WESTERN is "Roaring River Range," by Arthur Henry Gooden. It's a powerful, tightly knit story of a long and dangerous quest. Allan Rand, owner of a prosperous ranch in South Texas, came to the Roaring River country in search of Tom Sherwood, his father's best friend, who had disappeared many years before after fleeing the insane wrath of a lynch mob for a horrible double killing of which he was entirely innocent.

Nothing had been heard of Tom Sherwood since that day except a single rumor that Sherwood had settled somewhere near Roaring River and that he had had a daughter. It was little to go on and the trail was old. But Rand left everything behind him in his desperate attempt to find Sherwood or his descendants to right an old wrong.

Rand had barely entered the Roaring River country when he came upon Luce Henders and a bunch of Double Star cowboys in the act of hanging a young Mexican whom they accused of running with Rengos' rustling outfit. Always willing to aid the underdog, Rand pitched in from his hiding place on a ledge trail and forced the punchers to free the Mexican. But in a moment of carelessness he allowed one of the punchers to get behind the Mexican and suddenly the entire outfit was diving for cover and firing at him.

In a twinkling he found himself surrounded and forced to surrender. Henders accused Rand of being the Pecos Kid, a tough outlaw. The crew was all for a double hanging when the party was interrupted again, this time by the arival of Sheriff Harker and Cole Bannock of the Triple R Ranch.

Rand and the Mexican were released on the lawman's orders. Harker, in fact, revealed that he had the Pecos Kid in jail. As for the Mexican, he knew he was going

straight, after having once run with the long-riders.

Cole Bannock was impressed by Rand's appearance and offered him a job. But Rand said he'd have to think it over. He was still deciding later on in town when news swept through Roaring River that the Pecos Kid had broken out of jail. He had escaped on foot and when Rand learned that Bannock's daughter was heading for home in the buckboard he suddenly got worried.

Playing a hunch that the outlaw might intercept the girl and use her as a hostage to insure his getaway, Rand grabbed a horse and started off in pursuit. And the hunch proved right. He ran into the Kid after the latter had captured Kay Bannock. But he had to give the renegade his freedom in order to keep him from harming the girl.

This bold exploit made him ace-high with Kay Bannock and with her father. But it didn't help him with the hostile Double Star bunch. In fact, it wasn't long before he had a private ruckus with the owner of the Double Star—a ruckus involving a pretty Mexican girl, a Double Star puncher who died under gunfire and Rod Bannock, Kay's wastrel brother.

That fight precipitated him into the midst of the trouble that had been gradually building on Roaring River range. And when he accepted a job with Cole Bannock and agreed to take charge of Bannock's Mesa Camp he knew he was assuming the toughest assignment that could be handed out to a man. He knew, too, that the last three men to take over Mesa Camp had been shot in the back by outlaws.

But Rand had hell in his neck and he took the job. And all through the grim, dangerous days that followed he never lost sight of his hunt for news of Sherwood. It adds

[*Turn page*]

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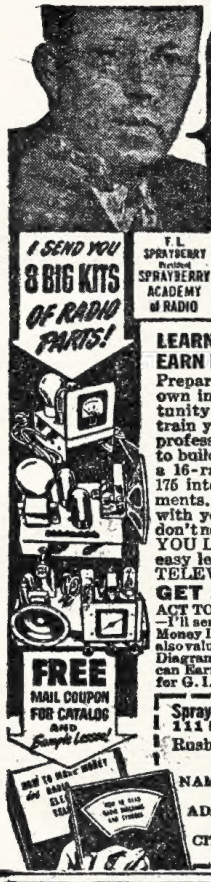

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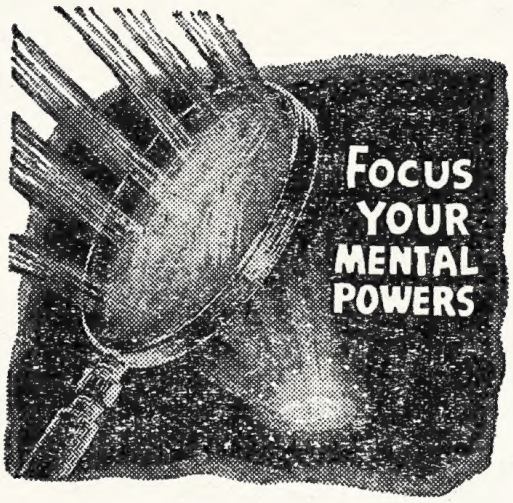

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From Our Readers

THE MAILMAN just arrived in his buckboard with a couple of sacks of mail from our TRIPLE WESTERN readers and just at random we have selected two missives for printing here. The first is from Charlie Gorman of Cincinnati. He has this to say:

Dear Editor: Hopalong Cassidy has always been one of my favorite Western characters, both in books and in the movies. In fact, now that I've got a television set I watch a lot of them on the television screen. I just can't get enough of them. And, boy, was I glad to read "Hopalong Cassidy and the Eagle's Brood" in the October number of TRIPLE WESTERN. Hopalong was never better and the story of the trek of Hoppy and his friends into an outlaw stronghold on a mission of vengeance gave me the best reading entertainment I've ever had. My hat's off to you fellows at TRIPLE WESTERN.

Thanks very much, Charlie. If we have our way you're going to get windburned and sunburned during the forthcoming winter and spring because we hope to keep the novels in TRIPLE WESTERN so good that you'll stop wearing hats.

The second letter is from Marty Dinmore of Chicago who issues a rave about our August and October issues.

Dear Editor: The August and October issues of TRIPLE WESTERN were just about the finest examples of magazine publishing I've ever seen. When I look at the list of authors on your covers I marvel how you can afford to print three novels by such top-flight authors in each issue. In all seriousness I can say that I have never failed to enjoy your magazine. And this goes for the novels as well as the short stories and articles.

We're happy to learn your sentiments, Marty, and we assure you that we'll be doing our level best to maintain the high standard of fiction we have established. And we take this opportunity to thank all the rest of you who have written in. Your letters are fine. Keep sending them. Address them to The Editor, TRIPLE WESTERN, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Thanks for listening to my palaver, everybody! See you in our gala next issue!

—THE EDITOR

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